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No. 56
VOLUME 19
2/6

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NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.

Maclaren House, 131 Gt. Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1.

Science Fantasy

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1962

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EDITOR : JOHN CARNELL

Cover photograph courtesy Anglo Amalgamated Film Distributors Ltd.

TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

Sole distributors in Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd.

In New Zealand : Messrs. P. B. Fisher, 564 Colombo Street, Christchurch, N.Z.

Great Britain and the Commonwealth 6 issues 17/- post free

United States of America 6 issues \$3.00 post free

Published Bi-Monthly by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.

MACLAREN HOUSE, 131 GREAT SUFFOLK STREET, LONDON, S.E.1

Telephone : HOP 5712

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Herewith a new adventure of Dr. Wilson, the occult specialist, and his niece Yalna, and introducing a new character, Cecil Cadman, an unintentional fire-raiser.

FIRE AND ICE

BY JOHN RACKHAM

o n e

Somewhere in Longfellow's 'Golden Legend' there comes the line . . . 'Evil is but good, perverted.' I read that line, and forgot it, in my childhood. It cost me much misery and suffering and several brushes with disaster, to hear it quoted by one of the finest men I shall ever meet, and to have the truth of it proved to the absolute limit. The whole affair started quite simply, with no more than routine and simple curiosity on my part, and it was not until a long time after it had begun that I realised just what I had stumbled into. My first intimation came with a telephone call, and a voice.

I was at London Airport, at four-thirty on a fine Saturday afternoon in July. Memory assures me that it was a fine day, but I was in no mood to appreciate that one. I was, in everything but the name, a refugee from my own country, and unjustly. And I was mad, coldly angry, and intent on levelling the score. I make it a personal rule not to nurse a grudge. In my work, as a social scientist, it would be a bad habit, anyway. You can't make much of a success of observing people and their peculiar ways, if you hang out your personal feelings to be trodden on. But this one was an occasion and it had kept me simmering all the way across the Atlantic.

I was still quietly raging as I made my way straight to the nearest telephone, dug in my memory for a certain name and number I'd been given by a good friend, and dialled. That was when I heard the voice, repeating back the number, and adding, "Who is calling, please?"

Imagine hot honey, poured over fresh winter snow, played back through a golden flute, with just a touch of velvet, and you're close. It erased my rage so fast, that I forgot, for the moment, why I was there. She said again, "Who is it?" and I came back to reality hurriedly.

"Is that Dr. Wilson's place? K. N. Wilson?"

"Yes. He's busy, just now. Can I help you?"

I very nearly told her she had already done quite a lot, just with that voice, but I thought better of it. "My name is Cadman," I said. "Dr. Cyril Cadman. I've just this moment stepped off the plane from New York. You know a Milton Green?"

"Oh yes!" her voice smiled at me. "Of the Egyptology Association."

"That's the one. He advised me to look up Dr. Wilson. I'm in a bit of trouble and I'm hoping he can advise me. I'd like to fix an appointment with him, as soon as possible."

"Just a moment . . ." she went away and another voice came on, a man, this time, very soft, but precise.

"Good afternoon Dr. Cadman. Wilson speaking. How can I help you?"

"Just information, is all. Professor Green said you'd be the best man to ask. I can't say a lot more, not on the phone."

"Very well. I'll expect you in half an hour."

"No, hold it!" I said, adding up half a dozen things at once and catching sight of myself in the mirror. "Look, I've just got off a plane. Give me time to freshen up a bit."

"Of course! I'm sorry. An hour, then?" and then the 'voice' came back on. "You have the address, Dr. Cadman?" and she read it out for me, before I could tell her I already knew it. I wouldn't have stopped her, anyway. I've rushed to keep a date many a time, but I cut my cleaning time in half that day.

All the while I was using the airport facilities, one half of my mind kept warning me that she would probably have angles, and a face like a horse, but the other half had me

whistling a gay lilt by the time I paid off the cab and strode up a gravel drive to the door. It was five-thirty on the dot. The house didn't tell me much. It was old, but not ancient, solid enough, needed a coat of paint in places and the grounds wanted attention, but it felt homely. Clutching the brief case which carried everything else in the world that mattered to me, I pushed the bell-button, and crossed my mental fingers. A doctor's what? Receptionist, maybe, or secretary? The door opened, quietly, and an angel smiled at me, an angel in a long blue housegown that matched the blue of her eyes.

"Dr. Cadman?" she asked, and I felt warm all over. Pure habit made me nod and admit my guilt, with a smile. She held the door wide for me.

"Please come in. I'll tell Dr. Wilson you're here." Then, as I brushed past and waited while she shut the door, I saw her put a slim finger to what I thought was a wrist-watch, and . . .

"Ken . . .?"

"Yes . . .?"

"Dr. Cadman is here. Shall I bring him up?"

"No, don't bother. I'll be down in about five minutes . . ."

She took her finger away from the 'watch' and gestured down the passage.

"This way," she murmured. "Dr. Wilson won't keep you waiting long." She went ahead of me and into a great big room, cool and full of light, with well-cared-for woodwork, massive furnishings, and seductive-looking chairs, and I followed as she went to stand in front of the fireplace, a big tiled affair, now filled with flowering branches of lilac.

"A minute . . ." I said, as she was on the point of picking out a seat. "This is probably none of my business, but when you spoke to Dr. Wilson, just now, what sort of a gadget was that? What I mean is, I heard you, and I heard him, but I didn't see your lips move, and I could swear I heard those voices in my head!" Her smile went away, and she stared at me for a full minute in wide-eyed silence. It gave me the chance to look at her properly, and I was glad of it. In my field, quick and accurate observation is important and I've trained myself to be good at it, but she wasn't the kind to take in all at one bite.

The observable details were simple enough. From her dainty slippered feet to her cloud of midnight black hair she

was five foot three. Her silken skin was the colour of old ivory by firelight and her cornflower blue eyes were big and deep enough to drown in. Her mouth was generous, in the best sense of the word, but it could have been a weapon, had she cared to use it that way, to stun a man into helplessness. Her age might have been anything from fifteen to thirty, but was probably about twenty-five, just a couple of years younger than myself. And, as I added up the housegown and slippers, I knew she was no receptionist, nor a secretary, either.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," I said, and I meant it in another way entirely, "but I haven't an idea what you're talking about. Sensitive?"

"Oh!" she gasped, and caught a hand to her mouth, all at once. "Oh no!" and then she giggled. I'd never cared for the giggling kind before, but this one was pure gold. I had to smile, in sympathy, although I didn't know what I'd said that was so funny. For an instant, she was like a little girl stealing jam. Then she grew up, all in a breath, and smiled a different kind of smile altogether.

"You're an Egyptologist, Dr. Cadman?"

"No such luck," I grinned. "My field isn't nearly as attractive as that. I'm in social science."

"Oh!" she said, again. "I wonder why you want to see my—er, Dr. Wilson, then? That isn't much in his line, you know. Of course, he's interested in all sorts of things, but strictly as an amateur. Ah, here he comes, now . . ."

We turned as the far door opened. I'll admit I was curious to see the man who could match this lovely lady, and, in a way, I suppose he did. He was about an inch or so under my height, about five-ten, wearing a very well-fitting dark grey suit and white shirt, and slim, but with plenty of width about the shoulders. Black hair, keen grey eyes, handsome in a reserved way—the sort of man you'd miss in a crowd, and yet there was something about him that caught the attention and held it. As he came across the floor to us, I saw there were streaks of white in his hair, and I judged him to be thirty-five or so, but with a lot of grief behind him.

"Dr. Cadman," he said, in that precise voice, and made a funny little gesture. "Excuse my not offering my hand. Just a foible. Yalna, my dear, are we all in order for tea?"

"It's all ready," she said. "You make a start, while I go and change," and she went out, with a quick dimple for me. Wilson took her place on the carpet by the fireplace and gave me an inquisitive look.

"You'll have tea with us, won't you? Please! We seldom have guests. Frankly, I can't imagine why Green should have sent you to me. There are plenty of men in New York who can tell you as much as I can . . ."

"Sorry . . ." I checked him. "Your wife made the same mistake. It's not Egyptology. I'm in social science on study-tour from the Sociometric Centre, California," and I handed him my card. He took it as if it was hot, and shrugged an apology for his awkwardness.

"It's a nuisance, sometimes, being sensitive. Forgive me."

"Funny—that's what your wife said about me when I told her I'd heard you talking over that gadget of yours. She said I was sensitive."

"Ah! Did she, now?" he murmured. "That explains quite a lot of things. Dear me, yes." He smiled, as if to himself, and shook his head. Then, "Dr. Cadman, how is your sense of humour?"

"About average, I guess. Why?"

"I'm afraid Yalna has taken a fancy to you, and is, consequently, playing tricks—not maliciously, of course—but then she couldn't be malicious if she tried. Just the same, I shall have to restrain her, this time. You're our guest, and a stranger in a strange land. It really won't do."

"I'd hate to spoil her fun," I offered. "If it's all right with you?" He chuckled again, just for a moment. Then he sobered.

"Come along, I'll show you what we have in the way of food and you must help yourself." We went into a kitchen, very neat and compact, all tiles, plastic-surfaces and gleaming chrome, where a long table had been laid out with crisp salads, platters of cold meats, hard-boiled eggs, tomatoes and bowls high with fruit. He took a big tray, and plates, and we were busy for a moment or two selecting what we fancied. Then we went back to the big room set a low table on the carpet between two big easy chairs, and that was that. Very cosy.

"Of course," he settled back and looked at me, "once she realised you were sensitive, that was enough . . ."

"Look !" I checked him again. "I'm sorry, but I don't know what you mean by this 'sensitive' thing. Am I peculiar in some way?" For some reason my question jerked him forward in his seat in dismay but before he could say anything, the door opened, and she came tripping in. We both got to our feet.

"Oh good !" she said, happily. "You've started. I was afraid I'd kept you waiting."

"Yalna, dear," he said, sternly. "Please go and get your meal, I've something to say to you !"

"All right," she said, negligently. "In a minute. Do you like my dress, Dr. Cadman?" Did I *like* it? She had put on a sleeveless, high-necked affair in heavy midnight-blue satin that looked as if it had been poured on, as far as her little waist. From there, it fell in sleek heavy folds to just above her knees. Tucked in tight at her waist, high above her left hip, she had a silver brooch, and from there her skirt was slit open all the way down, in the very latest 'Slave-Girl' line, so that when she moved she showed the full round curves of her hip and thigh. Underneath, she was wearing transparently sheer hug-tights with a built-in sparkle, so that you'd think she had powdered herself with diamond-dust. And, for her form, Paris of old would have handed her the golden apple without any hesitation at all. Venus would have been nowhere. Did I *like* it !

"I think it suits you," I said, and why I had to say that, I'll never know, but she seemed delighted.

"Yalna !" Wilson said, remindingly, and she made a face at him, and went floating out. I do mean 'floating.' The way a person walks can tell you a lot, if you know what to look for, but she didn't walk she . . . just floated. It was poetry in motion.

"She's a very lovely woman, Dr. Wilson," I said, and I meant it. On any other woman, that outfit would have looked risqué, but she made it, not exactly innocent, but well, wholesome. Wilson gave me a curious half-smile.

"She is lovely, isn't she? But incurably mischievous. You'll have to excuse her. Life has been rather dull for both of us just recently. That's why I decided to invite you here so unceremoniously. I'm glad she likes you, anyway."

"You said that before," I reminded him. "How can you be so sure?"

"My dear man, you don't imagine she put on that dress for my benefit, do you? She's proud of her figure, and she's determined that you shall have the chance to admire it. Women thrive on honest admiration—ah there you are—come and sit. Here, I think . . ." and he indicated a low pouffe, half-way between us and a little to my right. She put her plate on the table and sat, demurely as a schoolgirl, except that no schoolgirl ever had a leg as long, lissom and lovely as the one I couldn't help seeing. He gave her a severe look.

"Now, young lady," he said. "Are you being quite fair?"

"Perhaps not, but I just wanted to see—have you told him?"

"Not yet. Shall I, or would you rather do it?"

"No—you tell him, now. I want to watch his face—just to see."

"Very well," Wilson sounded patient. "Dr. Cadman, there's a lot to be said for old-fashioned formality, even if Yalna doesn't think so. May I introduce you to Miss Yalna Wilson—my niece!" I didn't know just what she was looking for, but what she saw was one very confused young man, striving desperately to adjust to a totally unfair situation and making a poor job of it—and her gorgeous blue eyes were keen.

Foolishly, I managed to say, "That was my fault . . . I guessed all wrong. I'm sorry."

"I'm not!" she said, promptly. "I'm glad! There's that lovely look in your eyes again. It makes me feel warm all over."

"Gently, my dear. You're forgetting that Dr. Cadman is unaware—he's not used to such leaps. Give him a chance to adjust."

"He's all right," she insisted, "as Spencer said 'Such is the power of that sweet passion, that it all sordid baseness doth expel.' And he's sensitive—he heard us, remember?"

"Will somebody please explain?" I asked helplessly. "I don't know what any of this is about, at all. I'd probably enjoy it far more if I did."

"Of course," Wilson nodded. "You carry on with your meal and I'll try to explain. It's rather involved, I'm afraid, but I'll make it as simple as I can."

two

"I'll begin with the gadget you were so surprised by," Wilson said. "You were quite right, you heard us, in your head. In your mind, would be a better way of putting it. It is a little device of my own. I tinker with such things in my spare time. I won't bother you with the details. It's enough to say that it amplifies a mental field and puts it in resonance with any other which happens to be within the affective area of a twin device. In short, if Yalna switches on, I can hear what she is thinking. If I switch on, she can hear me. It's nothing much, really."

"Nothing much?" I could hardly credit my ears. "You have a workable telepathic amplifier and you call it 'nothing much'?"

"Ah, but there's a rather large snag. It doesn't work for everyone. In fact it works very poorly, even for those who get results at all. The theory is very obscure. I'm not sure I understand it completely myself, but it calls for a certain type of mind—a certain type of person, indeed—to work at all well. Such people are exceedingly rare, in my experience. Offhand, I know of only three others. You heard, quite plainly, and you were within—how much—a foot or so?"

"I was close," I nodded, "and it sounded as if you were standing right next to me. It was only because I didn't see her lips move that I realised it at all."

"Quite! So you're a fourth. And, I may say, a very special sort of person. I don't know if you realise it. I suspect you don't."

"Well now," I grinned, "I've always suspected there was something unique about me, but it never worked as powerfully as this before." She knew what I meant, and made a face at me, immediately.

"Any more of that from you," she threatened, "and I'll cover this up!"

"Oh, don't be like that," I begged, "I was only kidding—honest!"

"So was I," she laughed, "and you are—and there's the other one." She slid her skirt aside and back, and stretched her long legs out for my admiration, as frankly as if we'd known each other for years.

"Yalna is proving to you, and herself, in her own unconventional way, what I've been saying. You're honest. I don't mean that as a silly compliment, and it isn't quite the right word. It's more a matter of being absolutely honest within yourself, and at peace with yourself. Doesn't the Bible say 'We deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us'? That's what it means. If we tangle up our thoughts with pretences and evasions and prejudices the 'truth is not in us.' And this gadget won't work for anyone like that."

"You see," she was serious, now, "when you first saw me, there was a lovely glow—I felt it. I *knew*. I don't need any silly gadget to tell me when a man radiates honest admiration. It's rare enough, Heaven knows! Most men either daren't look at all, or they leer!" and she shivered, just for a moment. "But you—you've no idea how nice it is, the way you look. And then, all at once, that look went away—regretfully—when you thought I was married to someone. So I wanted to see just how you would look, if I helped you a bit."

There came a peremptory bleat on a buzzer, and she looked round at her uncle, wonderingly. He frowned and got up.

"I wonder who it can be, at this hour?" he murmured, and went out. She reached across to touch my hand, and smiled.

"I'm sorry to have teased you. I hope you didn't mind?"

"You were taking an awful chance," I told her, steadily. "You could have been wrong. I'm not so sure that you weren't, at that."

All at once I heard Wilson's 'voice' saying "Why, hello, Ferguson, this is a pleasant surprise. What brings you here—come in," and the effect on her was electric. She was on her feet in a flash and tugging at that buckle at her waist.

"This Ferguson . . ." I queried, as she ran the zipp shut all the way down, "he's an enemy?"

"Oh no! He's a very good friend of ours. But he's not one of 'us'—not like you!" Just a foolish fancy of hers, perhaps, but it made me feel absurdly pleased. She did her conspiratorial wink. Then a long, lean, dour man came in, set his thin face resolutely, gave her a curt nod.

"Evening, Miss Yalna . . . excuse me . . . is your name Cadman?" I admitted it, wonderingly, and looked at Wilson, who had followed close behind. The new arrival pursed his lips and seemed to bristle, all over, thin hair, eyebrows, moustache and all.

"Inspector Ferguson," Wilson explained, mildly. "What's this, Ferguson—you're not going to arrest my guest now, are you?"

"Your guest, is he? How well d'you know this man?"

"Well enough. Why? What is he supposed to have done? Well . . .?" as the Inspector hesitated, and looked acutely uncomfortable.

"I thought I ought to warn you," he said, at last. "It's maybe nothing, mind, but one of the lads gave me the nod, just a while ago. 'You're a friend of Dr. Wilson's' he said. 'You ought to tell him he's harbouring an undesirable alien.' And I've seen the information, too. It's not nice."

"Now just a minute," I said, grimly. "I came in through the regular route. My papers are all in order. If I'm so undesirable, all of a sudden, how come I wasn't stopped?"

"Because you've done nothing wrong. Here. Yet! We're just keeping an eye on you, that's all."

"All very mysterious," Wilson said. "But you still haven't told us what the charge is, you know." He turned to me. "Would this be the 'trouble' you spoke of? I'm sorry, we seem to have monopolised the conversation so much with other matters that you haven't had a chance to get to your reason for calling."

"This is the trouble," I said, still grim. "I'm suspected of being a firebug. That's right, isn't it, Inspector? I travel through life setting fire to hotels, boarding houses and so on. Don't I?"

"Steady, Cadman," Wilson murmured. "Ferguson was trying to help, I think. Why not sit down and have a cup of tea, Inspector, and let Dr. Cadman tell us all about it? I confess, I'm curious . . ."

I told them. It was only because of Yalna, with the lovely legs now in hiding and her lovely eyes steady on my face, that I wasn't profane, as I recited the details.

"I'm in social science," I said. "I have my proper accreditations, if you want to see them. It's a big field. No one man can take it all. That way, you would chew up more than you could bite off. You break it down into sections. My particular study is the internal dynamics of small groups, specialised units within a larger society. All right? Now, about six months ago I started to run a study on a group—a little mystic brotherhood calling themselves the Seekers of

Knowledge—with their headquarters, which they call The Sanctuary, in California. No special reason to choose them, it just came out of the hat that way. And maybe I'd better alter that 'little' because they have Daughter Lodges all over the States, and at least one in England, right here in London."

"I've heard of them," Wilson confirmed.

"Fine! So I joined. Went through the drills, the rituals, the so-called 'lessons,' the initiations, and I attended as many meetings as I could. I was a good little 'Seeker' . . ."

"A moment," Wilson interrupted me. "Just what sort of information were you collecting. What were you observing?"

"That's pretty technical," I said, "but I can simplify it for you. I wanted motivations, satisfactions, results. These I can plot, in a certain code, on a chart, and thus get a profile. Like this . . ." and I showed them the very chart I had there in my brief case. "Here," I pointed, "is what they're after . . . what they think they get . . . and what they actually achieve. That's all, for this stage. What happens next is that hundreds of these go through a computer and are analysed—and all the rest of it. The fun started right there, when I put this data through. I hit a duplicate!"

"You mean, someone else had already covered your study?"

"No, not that. Somebody else had turned in a study of another group with an identical profile. That was unlikely enough to make me curious, but when I checked back for the twin group—guess who?" They all looked appropriately blank, and were too smart to guess. "Any of you ever hear of the Ozma Project?"

Wilson frowned. "Isn't that the group who are listening for intelligent radio signals from space?"

"Right first time. And I ought to correct just one item, here. I have three curves on each chart. And the Seekers duplicated Ozma, down to the last decimal point, on two of them. A bunch of cultists and a scientific group, matching in profiles, just doesn't make sense! So I went back to the Seekers. Just to recheck my figures . . ."

"A moment, again," Wilson put up a finger. "How well did you fit in with the Seekers? Were you just a lower-level member, or had you advanced to some official position?"

"Funny you should ask. I did all right. They took a regular shine to me said I had a lot of natural power, and I

only needed training. They'd have made me a lodge-master, if I'd been willing to accept."

"You refused office? Why was that?"

"Well . . ." I shrugged, ". . . you said it, yourself. I'm honest. All I wanted was data. I didn't believe any of their hokum about power and such. So, anyway, somehow, they got wise to what I was after. And there was a row. I got myself called a few choice names, like 'spy' and 'traitor' and so on and they tossed me out. Kid stuff. But I was still curious about my results, so I made arrangements to move East, the next day, to Denver. I knew there was a Daughter-Lodge there and I figured I could observe them and compare. And I got a note from the Grand Master, that evening. Written in red paint, on phony parchment—the usual flim-flam. It said 'He who betrays the Sacred Flame, its fiery blast shall turn upon him.' Just that. All over one backsliding member, I ask you? And my hotel caught fire and burned to the ground, that same night!"

"Ah!" Ferguson growled. "Now we're getting to it."

"They deliberately tried to kill you?" Yalna demanded, her blue eyes blazing. I nodded.

"You could say that. It just happened that I was out at a corner-end eating-house, having a bite, and I had this with me," I patted the brief-case, "so I didn't lose a thing. But I was mad—all burned up, if you'll allow me the phrase. There wasn't a damn thing I could do. What evidence did I have? Nothing! In the end, I decided to go through with my Denver trip and see if I could maybe get a line on this. I don't like being pushed around, for one thing and, for another, it didn't make sense. I figured either I'd committed some crime I didn't know about, or they were trying to hide something they thought I was wise to. A secret subversive organisation, a spy ring, a bunch of Commies, even. Anyway, I moved on, to Denver, and started snooping, and it happened again. My hotel went up in flames!"

"That's the information we have," Ferguson growled. "Denver . . . Omaha . . . Chicago . . . Detroit . . . New York . . ."

"You left out Cleveland," I reminded him, and he sniffed.

"We've the word from the people on your side. A series of mysterious fires in hotel rooms and you're the common factor in all of them."

"It's true!" I told him. "But not the way you mean. I'm on the run, brother, and I'm sick of it. That's why I decided to come to England. I hope and believe that your laws, here, have longer teeth and a stiffer arm than ours. You realise I couldn't go to our lawmen? I have no evidence they would look at. All they would do would be to throw me in the can until they made enquiries, and there is this about a hotel, you can get away in a hurry, if you have to. I had no fancy for being fried in some jail, believe me. And there's another big snag facing me. I've done some hard digging on the Seekers and they're loaded with loot. I mean, they have money on their rolls. Millionaires, society big-wigs, prominent people—with pull! I can't buck that kind of deal."

"It's quite a problem, certainly," Wilson murmured, "but I can't quite see what you were hoping for, from me?"

"Just information, that's all. Enough to give me some sort of toe-hold, so that I can break this racket wide open. I'm all through with running. I want to take a kick at them, for a change. They have a lodge, right here, and others about the country. If they're hiding something big enough and nasty enough to have to kill me to keep it quiet—then there must be some way I can find it. I want to know! So far as I know, they don't know I'm here," and I gave the Inspector a hard eye. He stared me right back.

"That's not the way we do things in this country, Mr. Cadman," he said, flatly. "I've heard your story, I'll not say I believe it, mind. I'm like you—I want evidence, first. But I've heard many a stranger yarn, and right here in this room. I'll say this much. I've a great respect for Dr. Wilson's judgment, and I'm thinking that you'd not be here if you were a wrong 'un. But we'll be keeping an eye on you, just the same. And if anybody tries setting fire to your hotel, we'll have our eye on him, too, you can be sure of that. Maybe it would save a lot of trouble if you'd tell me just where you're staying."

"I haven't booked in anywhere, yet," I said. "But I'll let you know, sure. And, Inspector, I'm grateful to you for your attitude, believe me."

"He's quite a nice person, really," Yalna smiled, "and you can forget all about hotel rooms, you know. You can stay right here, for a while, anyway."

"I couldn't think of it," I said, quickly. "I've imposed on you quite enough as it is . . ."

"Nonsense!" Wilson said, firmly, and got to his feet. "We will be glad to have you, and to help in any way we can. No, I mean it. You've given me something to think over, a problem to get my wits working again. Inspector, you will stay a while—have a glass of something?" Ferguson lost a little of his dour look, and indicated his willingness, as Wilson went across to a cabinet.

"It's a warm night," he said, by way of excuse. And it was warm, too. There wasn't a breath of breeze anywhere.

"Unfortunately . . ." Wilson handed me a well-filled glass, ". . . I'm afraid I can't help you much, off-hand. About a year ago, after a series of rather grim experiences, I decided it was time to give up a lot of my interests. We were a happy little group, in our way . . . but Chappie met the right girl, and decided to marry and settle down . . ."

"Dear Chappie!" Yalna nodded, and smiled to herself, and I felt a sudden and unrational dislike for this particular absent friend. What man, I wondered, could bring *that* light into her eyes, and then go off and marry some other woman? She sighed. "I'd like to see Chappie again, some time."

"Yes, it would be pleasant. And then, well, Hassim left us and went back to Egypt, permanently, and I cleared out almost all of my materials. All my books, manuscripts, instruments—all turned over to various learned bodies, here and there. But, give me a day or two and I think I can reopen a few contacts, and we'll see what we can find."

"You're very kind," I said. "I can't tell you—just a couple of hours ago I was a refugee, and pretty desperate. Now, all at once, I feel at home."

"Why not?" Yalna said, softly. "You're one of us."

"That's another point," Wilson gave me a keen look. "You have declared your beliefs. You have told us that you study other people's motivations and beliefs. Have you ever seriously considered your own? You refuse to accept 'powers of the mind,' although the Seekers assured you that you had power, and possibilities. Now, quite seriously, I tell you, also, that you have power, if you care to exercise it. What do you say to that?"

I never got the chance to say anything, because, all at once, there was something awfully wrong. He lifted his head, urgently. Yalna came up to her feet, her eyes wide, and I could see the sudden sweat on Ferguson's face. It was hot—and getting hotter by the second. I saw Wilson make a strange kind of twisting gesture with his right hand and then he whirled on us.

"Outside !" he ordered. "All of you, quickly. No time to explain . . ." and he ran to a big window, threw it open, called us with an imperious wave. Yalna ran, out and past him, and Ferguson after her and then me, and I heard him step out, to slam the window shut again. "Go on !" he cried. "Get well away—right down by the gate," and he wheeled and ran off to one side and round a corner.

"Come on !" Ferguson seized my arm. "Never argue when he talks like that. Just move !" and we went running. It was chilly, in the garden, by comparison with that room, and I shivered. We got as far as the drive-gate, and I heard a car engine start up. Then I saw a great black Rolls whip round the curve and come swooping towards us and stop. Wilson, still at the wheel, shoved his head out to look back and as he did so, the whole house literally exploded into flame. It wasn't like anything I've ever seen before in all my life. We felt the hot wind of the burst, but heard nothing more than a hissing sigh. The glare was blinding, the heat savage enough to scorch my face.

t h r e e

It was the incredible speed of it all that was so frightening. Solid bricks and mortar one second, a crackling white-hot inferno the next. It was so sudden, so total, and so intense that by the time we had shaken off the paralysis of shock, the worst of it was over, and the blaze was beginning to peter out for lack of material. A whole house gone in the time you could count fifteen, by seconds.

"Well ?" Wilson demanded, in a biting hard voice, "would you care to put the blame for *that* on Dr. Cadman, Ferguson?"

"Nay ! That can't be," the Inspector was hoarse. "He was in there, along of us, all the time—and man, I've seen a fire or two, what with the war and all, but I've never seen anything like yon. The speed and the heat !"

"We've gained something, then," Wilson snapped. "A shred, but we must be thankful for it. We have precious little else left." Then Yalna, who had been by my side, speechless, gave a sigh that stumbled into a sob, and turned, blindly, to cling to me like a child.

"Our home . . ." she said, chokingly. "It's all gone . . ."

"Sticks and stones," Wilson softened his voice. "Don't let it upset you, my dear. It's too late for that," and he turned his eyes on the Inspector again. I was watching him, now, and there was an expression on his face that I couldn't fathom, altogether. It was as if that fire had touched off a flame in him, and he was having difficulty in keeping it under control. "Ferguson," he said, "can I count on you for co-operation?"

"What is it you want me to do?"

"It may be a little, or a lot, I can't tell. This is the work of the Seekers, beyond doubt. Cadman is their target, no doubt about that, either. But, although we are lucky to have our lives, we have not a jot more evidence than we had before apart from your eye-witness testimony. And there is something else which must come first. I propose to remove Cadman to a place of safety, and I propose to do it at once. We must have a breathing space. When I've got him safely settled, then it will be time to think of more positive action. Now, can you—will you—cover up for me, about this? There will be enquiries, nosy parkers, questions to answer, and I can't afford the time, now. Will you see to it?"

"Maybe—but how long will you be away?"

"Not long. Let me see, this is Saturday—give me until Monday noon? Will that do for you?"

"I'll do what I can, but I cannot promise. Where'll you be?"

"Yes, that's a point. I'd rather you didn't know—that nobody knew, at all—it's the only way to keep a secret safe. But that would be asking too much. Here . . ." he groped in his coat, drew out a letter that had been opened. "The address is there inside. Keep it safe and don't open and read unless you have to. What you don't know, you can't give away by chance. Now, you two in you get, and we'll be moving." Then I found my voice, to protest.

"Hold it," I said. "I'm damned sorry, you know that, but I've done enough harm. Let me out, will you? I can't bring any more grief on your head."

"You were my guest, under my roof, and seeking my help," he said, and his eyes blazed. "That is enough for me to claim that it is now my fight as well as yours. Get in, we have a long way to go." With that tone there was no argument.

I helped Yalna into the car and climbed in beside her. The engine growled and we swept out into the road and away downhill like a black thunderbolt. Yalna was still sobbing, very quietly and it seemed the most natural thing in the world to put my arm around her and hold her close, although, for what I'd done, she had every right to regard me as a plague. It hurt far more than anything I'd felt on my own behalf, to feel her creeping close, and shaking with grief.

"You can bite me, if you like," I offered. "It was all my fault . . ."

"Don't . . ." she whispered, unsteadily, ". . . you mustn't think like that. Everything was going so nicely, too. We were getting to know each other, and having fun . . . and you were going to stay with us . . . Oh!" I hugged her, and registered a silent vow to go along with all the others I'd chalked up against a certain Grand Master I knew.

"I'm still with you, as far as that goes," I said. "And this won't do, you know. You'll ruin your lovely make-up!" She sniffed, against my chest.

"I don't *use* make-up. Why should I?"

"That's a good question. I wish I knew the answer. But nothing about you would surprise me, not now. Ever since I heard your voice on the phone, I knew I was in fairyland. Now you and your wicked uncle have captured me, and you're taking me to your secret castle, to fling me in the dungeons. You're a wicked witch, of course, and you have me under a spell. But just you wait! When the big payoff moment comes, I throw away my disguise, don my gleaming armour, unsheath my mighty sword and run you through!"

"Ah . . ." she said, in a very small voice, "but you don't know that I'm really a princess, *disguised* as a witch, and that I *want* you to stick me with your sword, because then the spell will be broken, and you will love me . . . and we'll be happy ever after!"

"That's a cute twist," I admitted, "but how do I know you won't turn into a toad, or something?" She giggled, which was what I'd been trying for, and sat up enough to push me away a little, which was my loss. Then all at once

her soft arms were round my neck and her tear-wet face against mine. Her mouth was soft and warm and wool, all in one.

"There !" she said. "Am I a toad ?"

"I guess not," I mumbled. "All right, I'll spare you the sword."

"Oh, but you mustn't. That's the best part, the whole point of the story. I insist on it !" and she giggled again. Then, "Thank you for helping me. You're very good. I'll be all right, now." She sat all the way up and leaned forward.

"Ken ! Where are we going ?"

"Out of the country," he said, without turning his head. "Away to the open wilds, where no one would ever think of looking for us, but where we have a very good friend and ally. Guess, now ?"

"But of course !" she cried. "The very place. Oh, it will be nice to see Chappie again, and Anna. It's almost worth it—for that !"

"There are always compensations," he agreed, "even in the worst events."

"Clue me in," I suggested. "You know what you're talking about, but I'm completely lost. Where is this Shangri La ?"

"Norway," he said, calmly. "With luck we should be able to catch a plane to Oslo, if not direct to Stavanger, and by this time tomorrow, we should be tucked away in a tiny fjord, a haven of security but among good friends. The Seekers have their arts, but I doubt if they can track us that far, at such short notice !"

It was eight-thirty p.m. when Wilson bought garage-space for the Rolls. By that time Sunday morning, we were chugging out of Stavanger harbour, and breathing a different air. That twelve hours had been lively, but we'd had time to talk a lot, mostly on personal matters, those thousand-and-one little matters which new-found friends exchange by way of filling in a background. None of them have any place here. We caught up with each other, that's all. But there were two things which stuck out beyond the rest.

They told me something about this Chappie Jones, enough to give me a fair picture, and I was looking forward to meeting him, especially as I couldn't miss noticing the stars in her eyes when she thought of him. What kind of a man, I wanted to know, could set that kind of fire in a girl like this and then go

and marry somebody else? This Anna must be really something! That was one of the things. The other was—magic.

"You take," I said, "equal parts superstition, ignorance, wishful thinking, auto-suggestion and coincidence, stir well, and there's all your supernatural powers. I'm in the business of studying people, remember? I went all through the stuff the Seekers had to offer, and, all right, they were sincere enough, they believed but they were kidding themselves. That's why I wanted to bow out when they offered me a position. All that talk about power!" Yalna got indignant with me, and she looked lovelier than ever when her eyes flashed like that, but Wilson soothed her, patiently.

"Let him find his own way," he advised, meaning me. "He is entitled to his opinions and he is honest enough to admit the truth, when the time comes." Which was very kind of him, but I couldn't see any time coming when I would have to believe in supernatural powers, all at once.

So there we were, hugging a jagged coast-line, ploughing into a sea the colour you usually associate with mint and a sweet-cool flavour, and enjoying a first glimpse of a land where evil and wickedness seemed to have no place. Our boatman, one Anse Ryker, a square-built, ruddy-cheeked native with a smile that seemed glued in place, told us he was a personal friend of the Jones' and that he had a place of his own about six miles further on, up the same fjord.

"We turn a corner, soon," he explained, "and then I will toot, to let them know you are here." He reached for the siren-cord. "It is a code," he said. "One toot is 'Hello, I am passing, can I do something for you?' and if they want something, they ring a bell. If not, they just wave 'Hello' to me. Two toots I'm telling them I have strangers aboard, so they will have time to hide or get some trousers on. Strangers are funny like that. Three toots, I have mail for them, and they come running to get it—you will see," and he hauled on the cord as he spun the steering-wheel, and the boat went chattering round in a great sweep.

Now we were entering a quiet cove, walled on three sides by high peaks fringed with fir and pine. Directly ahead of us there was a great flat table of rock, making a natural landing stage. Beyond it lay a smooth, gently sloping expanse of green turf half the size of a football pitch, and then a sturdy, rough-built timber cottage, snug up against the foot of the

rock wall. As the siren blasts ripped the silence to shreds, we slid in a great curve to back up alongside that flat rock, and two people burst out of the cottage, to come racing at full-tilt down the slope.

They might well have come direct from Norse legend, to music by Wagner. The woman, a little taller than Yalna, but about the same age, was her peer for loveliness, but of a totally different order. Darkly golden blonde, her long hair flying in the wind of her movement, she moved like a ballet dancer, or a magnificent animal. So, too, did the man who ran at her side. He was huge. Wilson had used the term 'tower of strength' to describe this man, and I had taken it as meaning character, but now I could see that it applied physically, also. The pair of them were bronzed, and glowing with tremendous health. She had quite obviously thrown on a thin cotton dress, half-buttoned and sun-faded, for our benefit, just as he had scrambled into a well-worn pair of slacks. In that very first moment, I had a strong sense of wrongness, as if I had broken in on somebody's private Eden. Then they came to a halt just as Ryker nursed his craft alongside. The big man stared, and then smiled.

"Talk of the devil," he said. "I was just writing to invite you, Ken. You couldn't be more welcome!" He stooped, extended an arm, and Wilson went up on to the rock. The bronzed woman, her smoky blue eyes alight with delight, did as much for Yalna and then it was my turn. That grip was gentle, but firm, and those muscles on his arms were real. Up I went, like a child.

"That the lot?" he queried, and, getting a nod from Wilson, he turned to Ryker, smiled, and said, "Thank you very much. You bring good news, this time."

"My pleasure," Ryker beamed, and his motor roared into life as he spun the wheel over and went away at the head of a curling wake.

"Sorry to descend on you out of the blue like this," Wilson sighed. "It is a relief to know you had been thinking of us, but that doesn't excuse the liberty. The truth is, Chappie, there wasn't anything else to do. Still, let me introduce Dr. Cadman—Chappie Jones." The big man took my hand, his grey-green eyes keen, but kind. Then he nodded to the woman, and she smiled at me. "My wife Anna" he said.

I had to admit I would have been hard put to decide between her and Yalna for sheer loveliness, but she was practical, too.

"You are just in time for breakfast," she said. "Come—it won't take a moment to prepare extra. This is an unexpected treat . . ."

"Oooh!" Yalna said, all at once. "You two look marvellous! All brown and simply bursting with health. You make me feel drab and dull!" Jones gave a grunt, took two steps, and, seizing her by the waist, hoisted her high in the air, so that she shrieked.

"Witch!" he chuckled. "Don't you start fishing for compliments you don't need. You're just as lovely as ever and you know it." The uneasy formal atmosphere snapped like string, and a moment later we were marching up the slope to the cabin like a bunch of school-kids on a picnic.

"You have a wonderful place here," I said. "I feel guilty, somehow, for intruding." Yalna heard me, and made a face.

"You'll have to forgive him," she said. "He's one of us, but he hasn't got used to our ways yet. He's still a bit stuffy."

"I knew something exciting was going to happen today," Anna announced, in triumph. "I could feel it. I *told* you, didn't I?" Jones chuckled as we got to the door and went in.

"So you did," he admitted. "Haven't I always said you're a witch! *And* you!" he added, as Yalna giggled.

"Correct me . . ." I said, ". . . if I'm wrong, but I thought all witches were old and hideously ugly crones, with no teeth and long pointy noses . . .?"

"That's right," he nodded, seriously, waving me to a seat. "These two are disguised, that's all. You wait until the spell wears off, then you'll see."

"I'm so glad you came, Dr. Wilson," Anna declared. "My husband has been so very peculiar, lately. I think maybe he is mad . . .?"

"You're both a bit mad," Wilson chuckled, "but you look tremendously well on it."

Appetising smells began to spread from the little gas-cooker in the corner. The cottage was surprisingly spacious, inside, and very neat. The walls were gloss-surfaced hardboard, free of ornament, with just a chin-high shelf all round, to take oddments. A bunk by one wall made seats for three of us, as there were only two chairs.

"It's cosy," Yalna approved, "but will you have room enough for all of us?"

"I think so," Anna decided. "There are two rooms upstairs. One little one, for Dr. Wilson. We can share the other one, and the two men can use that bunk . . ."

"Oh, but . . ." Yalna began to protest, and thought better of it. "We are putting you to a lot of trouble!"

"Nonsense!" Jones hushed her. "Our only trouble will be how to entertain you, after the first day or two. There isn't anything to do, except laze about, and go swimming." Anna chuckled, suddenly, and for no reason we could see, until Jones explained. "It's the swimming. Of course, she's used to it, and I'm getting that way, after nearly a year of it, but believe me, that water is cold! You dive in, scream with shock, scramble out certain you're going to die—and you feel tremendous afterwards!"

"Sounds rugged," I said, "but you look well on it. I'll have to give it a whirl, one time."

f o u r

We finished breakfast in high spirits, but there was more to Jones than just size and good nature.

"Let's go and sit in the sun," he suggested, "while it's going. We don't get so much of this weather that we can afford to waste it."

Leaving the two girls to clear up, we went out, found a convenient slope, and sat. The sun was full on us, and warm, so that I asked to leave off my jacket. Jones, stripped to the waist, nodded encouragement. "We've forgotten the sillier formalities, here," he said. "You do just what you wish. Now let's have it, Ken. What's the trouble, and how can we help?" Wilson sighed, shook his head.

"This is not for you, Chappie," he said. "All I ask is that you give a haven to Yalna and Dr. Cadman, here, for a while. That's all you need to know."

"Oh no it isn't," he objected. "I'm not blind. You came in a devil of a hurry with barely time to pick up off-the-peg overcoats, no time to pack bags, or for Yalna to change that beautiful but quite unsuitable dress. You have your 'danger' bag with you—which never leaves the Rolls normally. And it's not

you to come bursting in without warning, much as you're very welcome. You're in some sort of a mess and I want to know about it !"

"I suppose you have a right to know. Very well, you shall, but it is really Dr. Cadman's story." He looked to me. "Would you mind ? I'd rather like to hear it again, to be frank. There are points about it which puzzle me."

"Me too !" I said, grimly, and I gave Jones the tale, as briefly as I could make it. He sat quite still, listening, until I got to the part where Wilson's house went up. Telling it now, in cold blood, and against this rare background, it seemed unreal, to me, but it hit him like a blow.

"Your home !" he gasped. "It was my home, for a while. I can hardly believe it !"

"True, nevertheless," Wilson sighed. "It was all over in seconds, as if it had never been."

"But all your priceless materials, the books, manuscripts, instruments and everything, all gone ?"

"Fortunately, it isn't as bad as that. I had cleared out most of my more precious belongings, you know, after you left. Still . . ."

"It was still your home !" Jones growled. "The devils !"

"My fault," I said. "Whichever way you cut it, they have the finger on me, and that's the truth. No offence, but I didn't want to come here, at all. I've been on the run far too long. I wanted to stay put and have a crack at them, somehow. Only—I haven't a clue where to start !"

"How the blazes did they work it ?" Jones wondered, and Wilson shook his head, thoughtfully.

"They must have known—after all, the police knew where to find Cadman, so they must have done the same. But that blaze was another thing altogether."

"Ah well—I suppose we can't help that, now. You're safe here, at any rate. And very welcome. Hello, what's up with you two ?" for the ladies had come across the turf to us, with very odd expressions. Yalna was trying hard not to laugh, I thought, and Anna was concealing distress.

"We want to swim," she said, awkwardly, "but we have no costumes ?"

"So ?" he said, wide-eyed. "We never have had any . . ."

"Very sensible, too," Wilson murmured. "It would be ridiculous to achieve this degree of private freedom, only to

clutter it with useless convention," Anna went pink and looked at me, appealingly.

Then Yalna put in, "She's afraid you might be offended, that's all. You see, we all know each other much too well to worry about being naked—but you're a guest."

"It is proper," she said, hesitantly, "to consider how other people feel. I would not like to give offence . . ." All at once, I got it, and I felt small.

"Good grief!" I said. "You mustn't let me spoil your fun! This is all yours, and you must do whatever you like. I'm enough in your debt as it is. In any case, as Wilson just said, it would be stupid to ruin this wonderful weather for the sake of a damn silly convention."

"There, I told you!" Yalna declared. "He's one of us!"

"Dr. Cadman . . ." Anna began, and I shook my head.

"Make it 'Cyril,' please, and I do understand, and I appreciate it, but you mustn't put yourself out for me. As a matter of fact, I'd like to join you in the water. This weather is really something."

"I'll endorse that," Wilson said, promptly, and as the girls ran off indoors, we peeled rapidly, folding our clothes and laying them where the sun would keep them warm. Jones was ahead of us, as he had only to slip out of his slacks, so he went indoors, and by the time they were undressed he had reappeared again, with towels, and a great armful of white fur that he spread out before us.

"Polar bear skin," he said. "A wedding gift from Anna's parents. It's an improvement on turf, for sitting on." I heard shrieks and splashes as the girls went in, and I shivered a little.

"Is it really all that cold?" I asked, and Jones chuckled, hugely.

"It's worse—far worse than you can imagine. But it very definitely is worth it. Come on!"

We went down to the flat rock, where Anna stood watching Yalna, critically, in the attitude of a teacher with a favourite pupil. And Yalna, dripping, was sucking in huge breaths as if she was determined to burst herself. Jones, grinning, pointed his finger and touched her ribs and she twitched away.

"Oh don't!" she gasped. "I shall never be the same again. That's not water—it's snow-broth!" I looked apprehensively at Wilson and he crooked an eyebrow at me, ruefully. We followed Jones down to the edge, and in he went, with barely a splash. Wilson stood by me.

"No time for faint hearts," he said, and we went in together. I'm pretty sure I was a full half-second ahead of him, scrambling out. I could see Jones still in there, spouting like a junior whale and I could hear Anna laughing at me, but I was too shocked, at that moment, to do anything but sit and wonder where all my blood had gone. At my elbow, Wilson shook the water from his hair.

"I wouldn't care to swim very far in that," he said, jerkily. "I don't wonder Chappie took a year to get used to it." Jones came thrashing across and out, blowing mightily, and laughed.

"Catches your breath a bit," he said. "How d'you feel?" to me. I'd been asking myself that same question, now that my blood was crawling back from its hole.

"I think I'll live," I decided, confidently, and he laughed again. Then Yalna came to sit by me, with Anna. The sunshine was striking through my numbness, now, and I began to glow all over. It was a tremendous feeling.

Anna asked, "Well, Cyril—was it worth it?"

"But definitely," I grinned. "I don't wonder you're so radiantly gorgeous, if you do this kind of thing regularly," and Yalna gave me a quick dig.

"A fine thing!" she complained. "You never said all those nice things to *me*! I wish we'd never come. You don't love me any more!"

"Oh, you!" I said, resignedly. "Nothing could change you. It's too late for that, now!"

"What d'you mean?" she cried, indignantly.

"Well . . ." I said, airily, "everybody knows you can't improve on perfection, don't they?" and Jones chuckled.

"Give up, Yalna, honey," he said. "You've met your match, this time. Anna, how about some coffee?"

"All right," she got up, and Yalna got up too, using my hair for a prop to rest her weight on.

"I'll think of something," she promised me. "You just wait!" and they went off up the slope to the cottage, arm in arm. Totally unlike in colour, the one a poem in shades of bronze and gold, and lithe as an athlete, the other all cream, ivory and black and lusciously rounded—but they were a match in loveliness.

Wilson sighed. "If there was only some way to catch and preserve moments such as this. They come all too rarely, and last only for a brief space." I saw Jones flick him a sharp

glance. We got up and went back to where we'd left our clothes, and settled down on the warm bearskin.

"What's on your mind, now?" Jones demanded.

"I'm growing old," Wilson said, softly. "That snow-broth has stirred my wits into seeing something I should have seen much earlier. Chappie—we can't stay here. We should never have come. My fault, entirely, for being so thick-headed. I'm afraid we've put you in danger."

"If you're thinking about the Seekers," I said, "I can't see it. They'll never be able to track us, here."

"I doubt if they need to track us. I have the feeling that this is on a different plane altogether. But leave it, for the moment. Here come the ladies, and we don't wish to upset them unnecessarily. Keep them talking a moment, until I investigate . . ." he got up, not saying just what it was that he was going to do, as Yalna and Anna came over to us with a tray each. Then, somehow, there was no need for any investigation, at all. I knew, positively, that something was all wrong. I could feel it. Yalna put down her tray and stood up, electrified all at once. Wilson, going towards the cottage, halted dead—put up his hand—and then wheeled round, eyes blazing.

"Run for it!" he snapped. "Run—down to the water's edge—fast as you can!" In a second, we were all running hell-for-leather towards the rock. There, as we stopped and looked back, the cottage seemed to explode into a huge fire-ball, with a great soundless 'Poof!' of white-hot flame. The heat was so immediately and savagely intense that I felt my face and body scorch, and there was nothing for it but to plunge into that bitterly cold water. With the others, I surfaced, and clung, miserably, to the edge, and peered, slit-eyed.

Like it or not, I had to agree with Wilson on one thing. It was no ordinary fire. Heat like that would have made short work of the toughest materials. That little timber cottage was no more than a mouthful for it. Within scant seconds, the mightiest of the flames were gone, leaving only a hot glow, and a heap of crackling white ash. We dragged ourselves out, shaken and stunned, and went back up the slope, slowly, to where we had been sitting. It had come and gone so fast that the coffee-pots were still steaming. Jones stood like a dead man, grey-faced as Anna took his hand. Her eyes were bright with tears she blinked away. I felt like a murderer.

To Wilson, aside, I muttered, "Get me out of this—please! Get me off the hook. I've done enough harm, damn it. First your home . . . now this . . ." I turned to Jones. "I'm sorry. I know that doesn't begin to cover it, but I wouldn't have wished this for all the world. At least let me offer to pay for the damage . . .?"

"Forget it. What's done is done!"

"But it's my fault. You shouldn't have suffered. It's not your fight."

"It is *now*!" he corrected me, grimly. Wilson sighed.

"I was afraid you'd take that stand, Chappie. We can't have it, you know. You're not a free man, now. You have responsibilities!" Then Anna moved, like lightning, to stand before him, her smoky blue eyes blazing.

"You say that—to us?" she cried. "After what you have done for us? After what you taught me, yourself, about love? You told me, and it was true, that there is good love and bad. The good kind—the 'power'—is sharing, is giving, and taking, and loving everybody who has the power, honestly, freely and sincerely. And the bad kind, the cheap kind, is saying 'I love you, and you belong to me, alone, and to nobody else. I will keep you all to myself, body and soul, like a slave.' Now what are you saying, that the love of Chappie and me is the bad kind, the selfish kind?"

"No, my dear," he shook his head. "I didn't mean that at all. I meant that you two had chosen to keep to each other, that's all. You have the right to do that, you know. And my only wish is to save you from further hurt . . ."

"A right? We will shut ourselves off from our companions, because of a cottage?" she tossed her head, indignantly. "It was ours—we built it. We can build another afterwards!"

"Can I get a word in, here?" I interrupted. "You're all wrong, on this. You four have links. You belong to a different world from me. I'm the odd man out. This is my fight, and I can't let you drag yourselves in any more than . . ."

"You are one of us!" she had wheeled from him to me. "You do not know what that means, yet, I think. It means that you are part of me—what hurts me hurts you, what pleases me pleases you—and the other way round as well. I was 'odd man out,' once, with these people, because I didn't know. Like you. But Dr. Wilson, and Yalna, and Chappie—they died, for me! Did you know that? Just because they knew I was one

of them. That is what love really is. It is power. It binds people together. It is not something you can do by yourself, but is the only thing you can give to someone else without losing. And the more you give, the stronger it is . . ."

"There's something else," Jones said, and there was something about his voice that made Anna turn. It caught my ear, too. "We're in worse trouble than I realised. Like it or not, Cyril, this is something you *have* to share with us." He looked round at us, steadily. "I've always thought of this place as a haven, but it's just struck me that it makes a first-class death trap!" He paused, set his jaw. "We're all alive, and comfortable, right now. But what of tonight?" Anna caught her hand to her mouth, but it didn't register, with me.

"We'll be far away, safe and sound, long before then," I said.

"How?" he asked, simply, and all the brightness went away from the moment as that simple question went in and stuck.

"Your friend with the boat . . .?"

"Anse will pass this way again about nine o'clock tomorrow all being well. But being a good friend, and considerate of our privacy, he won't come near us any sooner. His place is six miles away, up fjord, and he's the nearest. So—we have no shelter, no food, no clothes, and when the sun moves behind those peaks up there—it will get cold!"

It was so simple I just couldn't grasp it. You get so used to the many resources of civilization that it seemed incredible that five of us, all sound in wind and limb, and sane, should have to sit and wait for suffering and almost certain death from exposure and not be able to do a thing about it. To be so utterly and completely stopped—by nothing! Six short miles lay between us and safety. They might as well have been six thousand.

"This is fantastic!" I argued. "There must be *something* we can do?"

"You name it," he said, "and we'll try it!" The cold finality of his tone made me shiver, for all the sunshine. I fingered my folded clothes, and they fell into handfuls of charred rag at my touch. My wallet was whole, but baked. It cracked as I opened it. Ironically enough, my brief case, underneath, was all right. Wilson's situation was precisely like mine—one brief-case. The two girls had nothing at all. Even the towels were baked crisp. The bearskin had been in a hollow, out of the direct glare, and was unmarked. One bearskin and two brief-cases and nothing else.

Then Anna spoke. "There is a way," she said. "Anse Ryker's place is only six miles. I shall swim for help." Jones didn't even turn.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said, gently. "You know it's impossible."

"It is not ridiculous. Listen—in a little while the incoming tide will be at maximum. It will help me. And the sea water is warmer. I can do it. I can try, anyway."

"No!" he said, angrily. "You're out of your mind just to think of it. At the very least, it would take you half an hour, going flat out all the way. And half an hour in that water would make a fish think, never mind you."

"But what else is there to do? In a little while it will be too late. I am the best swimmer here. I can try . . ."

"It appears to be our only hope," Wilson said, and Jones stared at him, incredulously. "I appreciate the rigour, Chappie, old friend. You and I have seen men die in water like that. But for your strong arm, I would have been one of them. Alone, Anna would not stand a chance—but we can help her." I hadn't the ghost of a clue what he meant, but I saw Yalna nod, suddenly, and Jones frowned, like a man faced with a bad decision. Then he sighed, looked to his wife, and put out his hand, to touch hers.

"I won't stop you—if you must," he said. She smiled, confidently.

"I will do it, if Dr. Wilson says. What do you want me to do?" she turned to him. He went down beside his case, fished out a couple of discs about half an inch in diameter, and a length of silk thread. Threading one disc, he put it round her neck, so that the disc hung in the hollow of her throat. The other he suspended on a longer thread, passed it over Yalna's head, and it hung and was caught between the full swells of her breasts. They glinted golden and bright, those discs.

"Now," he said, "that will establish a link. Anna, my dear, you do what you have to do, as best you can. Go when you are ready, when the time seems best, and do not worry about anything else. Just swim, hard and fast. We will do the rest. Call on us. You have our lives, if need be."

She swung round without another word, and went striding down to the rock, with Jones standing to stare after her. However long I may live, I shall never forget that sight, of the lithe, naked, golden girl striding boldly towards that frightful swim and almost certain crippling agony and death. By the time I could get my eyes off her, the rest of them had set themselves.

five

Yalna was flat on her back on the bearskin, her head towards the sun, her arms and legs spread wide, like a star, the golden disc gleaming on her bosom. Wilson knelt by her left hand, Jones by her right, both facing the sun, and all three breathing deeply and in unison. I could see vague resemblances, here, between this and the rigmaroles I had learned from the Seekers, and I was suddenly angry.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" I growled, and Wilson twisted his head to look up at me. His eyes were alight with a strange fire now, and there was authority in his voice.

"I may not be able to cast thunderbolts," he said, tensely, "but I do have some skill in directing more vital forms of energy. I propose to collect the living essence of Chappie, Yalna and myself and send it to Anna, to keep her warm and strong in the ordeal she is facing."

"Blah!" I snapped, sneering. "You expect me to stand by and do nothing, while that lovely girl freezes to death waiting for you to help her?"

"I expect nothing," he said—and at that moment, from the corner of my eye, I saw Anna point her arms heavenward and plunge. I will swear he didn't see it, but he wrenched, stiffly, and his face hardened. "I don't expect you to help, or understand," he said, and his voice was rough, now.

"This is as much for you as anyone else," Jones said, and there were swords in his voice. "At least one life is directly at stake, on your account. If you can't help—keep off!" and he took hold of Yalna's left hand with his right. Wilson took her other hand, the two of them linked their free hands, interlacing their fingers and brought their palms down flat on her navel. Then they went completely still, apart from their steady breathing. There was no sign, but I knew, I could feel, that they were working hard. That they were sincere, I didn't doubt for a minute, but that didn't mean they would achieve anything. I was repelled and yet fascinated. And I wanted to help.

"I don't believe any of this," I said, thickly, "but I want to help. If there's anything I can do, I want to do it." For a long minute there was no response, then I heard Wilson's voice, crackling with controlled effort.

"Your help is welcome, only if sincere. Kneel between us . . . as close as you can . . . take our wrists with your hands

... one in each ... and give ... !” I hesitated. It was insane, nonsense, mumbo-jumbo, but then I could see the warm ivory of Yalna’s body fading, becoming white. I went down on my knees between her spread legs, and the inside of her thighs against my knees was icy ! Shivering, I inched closer, that chill marble flesh burning mine, and reached out, took a deep breath—and grabbed hold.

It was exactly as if a flood of that damned ice-water had squirted up my arms on the inside, filling me with deadly chill. I could feel the muscles of my arms and chest knot and ache with the cold of it. But then I had a flash, just for a moment, of Anna, battling her valiant way through that blood-stopping water and I set my courage as hard as I could. If they could give, then so could I.

There’s one nice thing about cold—if you care to look at it that way—past a certain point, you go numb and can’t feel anything at all. I lost my hands, my arms, and then my legs too, and all I was conscious of was the twin rise of her bosom, between the V-shape of their downstretched arms and a creeping uncaring numbness that seemed to throw a fog over my eyes. I lost all idea of how long I’d been doing this, a lifetime, or a minute, it was all the same to me. I’d got to the point where I wasn’t sure any of this was real, anyway . . .

Then, through the haze, I heard Wilson say, from miles away, “That’s it ! She’s done it—done it !” and I peered, blearily, to see him lift his hand, very slowly, from her belly. Jones let go, his fingers sticking out as if cramped. And I tried to unfasten my grip on their wrists, and couldn’t get any messages through to my hands at all. Which was ridiculous, and made me laugh.

“You’re sure ?” that was Jones, like a man half drunk, trying to talk precisely. I saw Wilson nod, and sag wearily and then, very faint, but very plain, I heard a crazy toot-toot-toot and Wilson braced up, nodded.

“Good girl !” he breathed. “Her first thought was to let us know. It’s all right, Chappie, you can let go, she’s safe !” I saw Jones move, and roll over to one side, and stretch out, flat. Then, mysteriously, somebody lit a fire in my arms, in my legs, in my stomach and I began to get warm again. Wilson looked over his shoulder at me, and frowned, wriggled to reach and touch me.

"Let go!" he instructed. "Recall exactly what you were doing, just now, and reverse it!" Whether that is sense or nonsense, I knew exactly what he meant and did it, and, within seconds, I was normal again. Weary but normal. And a most confused and bewildered person indeed. All my common sense, and all my hard won objectivity told me that what I had just seen, and done, was impossible. But it had happened. That confusion lingered in the back of my mind all through the next hour or so.

Ryker came, with his boat, and Anna, who had 'borrowed' a great sloppy-joe sweater from him. That man was a paragon! His sympathy and understanding were quick, genuine, and understated. Without hesitation, he offered us the hospitality of his own home, and any comforts we wanted, from his capacious stores. You'd have thought that a thing like this was a regular occurrence, and, in fact, something close to it might well have been.

"I have guests, often," he explained, "who have accidents, fall in the water, lose things. So, you see, I keep spares." He would have put us up for the night, but Wilson wouldn't have that.

"Just the use of a room, for long enough to decide what we will do next," he declared, "and enough presentable clothing to send us on our way. For we must be on our way, as soon as we can." He looked down at Yalna at his feet, who was still unconscious, wrapped in the bearskin. That sight grieved me, but he had assured me that she would be all right, in her own way and her own time. I had a short and sharp argument with him about bearing the expenses and he was gracious enough to grant me that privilege, at least. Then we gathered, grimly, in a little room, under Ryker's roof, to sip hot soup and hammer out some decisions.

"Let us be sure of this," Wilson said. "The time for half-measures and fumbling is past. That we are still alive is sheer good fortune. Cadman bears a protective power of his own, but it cannot go on. We must hit back. And to do that, effectively, we must use their power against them. As a beginning, we must, I think, accept that Cyril is a marked man, in some way. Somehow, they have put a mark on you and we must discover it."

"Well . . ." I shrugged, ". . . you've seen me stripped to the skin. No mark, so far as I know." Yalna, by this time,

was sitting up on a bunk, with the white fur thrown back enough to get her head and arms free so that she could cradle her soup bowl in both hands, to sip.

"It could be something like this," she suggested, indicating the little gold disc that was once more tight caught in the cleft of her full bosom. "A link of some kind?" Wilson nodded, but I shook my head.

"I don't go for ornaments like that."

"Not necessarily as obvious. It might be much simpler. Would you turn out your wallet and brief-case and let me examine?"

"Sure! Why not?"

I opened up and spread everything that was mine on the plain pine table-top. He passed his hand, very slowly, over the spread papers, about an inch clear. An hour earlier I would have sneered. Now, I watched. He frowned, made a few test passes, and then, with the tips of his fingers, he sorted out three documents. One was the curse note from the Grand Master, that had triggered the whole thing. The other two were blank letter-heads. All three had the Seekers' monogram. That was the bit he was interested in.

"Ostensibly," he said, "this is 'S' and 'K' interlaced but it looks to me remarkable like certain diagrams I have seen before. This is indeed a gain. Not only do we have the trigger they are using, but it gives me a lead on how to counter them."

"You mean—that little dingus was enough for them to home in on me with that fire-ball stunt? That's pretty hard to believe."

"And your belief can be of crucial importance to us," he retorted. "I am attacking it. What a man chooses to believe is his own concern, but not when it hazards the lives of those around him. Your negative belief is handicapping us. Chappie, you're done with your bowl, I think?" and he took that soup bowl, tore up the papers, with my okay, put the pieces in the bowl and set fire to the lot. We stood and watched the paper curl and char.

"That, I suppose, will get us off the hook?" I asked, but he shook his head, grimly.

"The pattern is too well established, by this time. This will merely make it a little harder for them, that's all. But watch!" and the papers were burned out, now. A smoky haze hung over the bowl. And then it began to glitter and sparkle. There

was ice forming, on the rim and outside of the bowl. It was genuine, too. I touched it. "When you concentrate heat in one place," he said, gently, "you must take it from somewhere else. Somewhere else got hot, for a little while, just then. Does that make you think?" It certainly did, but not in any helpful way, except to convince me that maybe he knew what he was talking about and I didn't. That last bit I was sure of.

"Now!" he said, and the fact that all he had on was a sloppy-joe sweater, just like the rest of us, didn't make any difference at all, he was in charge, and no doubt about it. "We must be away from here. Ah!" he collared Ryker, who came in at that moment to find out if we wanted anything. "We need clothing, and you must run us back to Stavanger, at once!"

Ryker was full of apologies about the cost of fuel, but as soon as we made it clear that we would expect to pay for our whims, it was all fixed. We didn't come off too badly, at that. Wind-breakers and whip-cord slacks for us, jeans and jerseys for the girls and we looked like typical tourists. And Wilson told us we were on our way to Oslo. It took Anna a minute to correct him on the way he said it, so that it sounded more like 'Oh-slow,' and then we could ask him why?

"Armament!" he said, crisply. "I have a very good friend there, who may be able to supply something I need." And that's all he would say. Anna filled in the rest of the silences. I think she was reacting from a whole year with nobody to talk to but her husband. I caught him grinning a time or two at the way her tongue ran on.

We came in, through thin cloud and a purple sky over the island-studded harbour of Oslo, in the late evening, and if anybody had been tipped off to watch out for us he had a poor chance. Dressed the way we were, we just faded into a background of thousands like us, and Anna was a typical touris-guide. We rode up the main street.

"This is Karl Johan's Gate," she told us. "There's the Royal Palace . . . that's Karl Johan's statue . . . this is where all the big business is done, all the big merchant houses, the banks . . . the Grand Hotel . . . our National Theatre . . . the Storting Building . . ." but Wilson was after the History Museum, close by. It was still lit up and drawing spectators, even at this late hour.

"Wait here," he told the cab-driver, and us. "I doubt if the man I'm after will be here, but there'll be someone who can tell me where to find him." He was back in thirty seconds, with an address for the cabbie. And I want to make a point, here. One thing was impressing me more and more about all these people, the one big thing they had in common. At ordinary times, they were casual and easy-to-live with, almost too easy, but when the heat was on, they could pull out the most incredible intensity of purpose I've ever seen. As now. Wilson was humming like a dynamo, inside, and we were carried along with it.

"Prepare for an eccentric," he warned. "Professor Hendrik Kristian is an authority on Norse legend, historian, antiquarian, and many other things besides, but he has a reputation for being short with fools. Let me do the talking, and follow my lead."

"This is a bit off the beam from Egyptology, isn't it?" I asked, and he fastened on that in a flash.

"The very attitude I wish to avoid," he said, sharply. "Elemental forces are the same, no matter what the cultural background. There is very little but the name to differentiate between the Sacred Flame—and a thunderbolt!"

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The professor answered our knock in person. A great tall hunched-over eagle of a man, who had been big in his prime, with frosty eyes and white hair, and a 'Who-the-hell-is-this?' expression. But he took a second look at Wilson, and the frost melted.

"My friend!" he cried. "Why did you not tell me you were in Oslo? You will come in, at once . . . all of you . . ." and he led us into a place I would need a week to learn off, and a whole chapter to describe. I think four architects had worked on that house, without speaking to each other. We ended up in a room stuffed tight with books, papers, prints, pictures, chunks of spar and crystal, weapons hanging around the walls, and piles of junk on every possible flat surface. Armfulls of print were swept aside unceremoniously so that we could sit, and an aged housekeeper was sent about the business of getting something to celebrate the occasion. Wilson assured him that we had only this minute arrived in town, and had come straight

to see him, and that made the old man suck in his breath with a loud hiss.

"Ah—fireworks !" he said, and chuckled. "You are up to some devilment, again, eh ? I hear things about you, and I envy. I am too old, these days, to go chasing devils, I think. But now, you will stay here, of course ? There is plenty of room, though you might not believe it. Always, with me, everything is sideways—but it can be cleared up, quite quickly, this mess . . ."

"Just a minute !" Wilson checked him. "You'd better hear why we are here, first. We aren't the safest people in the world to have as guests, just now . . ." and he told the old professor the full tale, in quick words. Old Kristian sat still enough, but his eyes were bright and keen in the lamplight as he listened.

"We are far from safe," Wilson wound up, grimly. "We jeopardise this house, just by being here, and if you were to ask us to leave, at once, I wouldn't blame you in the least. These Seekers have great power, and they use it !"

"You," the old man glared at me, "are a fool ! You who study the ways of people, yet ignore the way they think, because you cannot measure it on a chart, with figures ! Americans—hah ! You call it motivation, and that is all you know about power—a drive ! A small, personal thing. You know nothing about the real forces, all around you, because your minds are stuffed with figures and measurements !" Then he looked at Wilson again. "What do you want from me ? I am no wizard !"

"The old books have secrets. The runes, perhaps. I need to know how to trap a thunderbolt and send it back. Believe me, if the Seekers run true to the form they have shown, you may need the knowledge yourself !"

"Bah !" Kristian growled. "They could strike this house, any time, and who would lose ? It would be better burned. I am not worried about that. But he who puts out his hand to seize a thunderbolt . . ." and he shook his head. Then, all at once, he got up. "Stay here. Be comfortable. I will look !"

"I'm sorry to be a stiff-neck," I said to Wilson, when the old man had gone out of the room, "but I can't see the relationship between a modern cult-group, and Scandinavian thunderbolt myths. And I can't see why or where Ozma comes in the picture, at all !"

"I've been thinking about that," Yalna said, quietly. "It's obvious—and yet so fantastic that it's hard to accept, at first. Think of it this way. The Ozma researchers are listening for signs of intelligence, from the planets of some other star, by radio. According to Cyril, a study of the behaviour-patterns and motivations of the Seekers shows a similar profile, in fact, that they, also, are listening for intelligence from elsewhere, only they are doing it on a mental level, not by radio. And," she gave us all a wide-eyed look, "if you care to think about it, as far back in history as we can go, this much is common belief, that 'power' comes from on high. Up there. The hills, or the high places, or the stars, or Heaven, whatever you like to call it—but from up there. I think the Seekers, either by accident or design, have made contact of some kind, have acquired power and are using it!" Before we could comment on that fantastic idea, old Kristian came back, carrying a massive old book.

"Some of the oldest runes ever found," he said, laying the book down and opening it, with a crackle of old leather and odorous parchment. We gathered to look over his shoulder as he turned the pages and explained. The angular markings had been found on all sorts of things. "This one," he pointed, "on the blade of a sword, to make it drink one life at each stroke. This one," he turned a page, "is a famous one, the Kovel spear-head, from about the third century. The marking is just one word—TILARIDS—it means 'The one which hits the target.' Short and simple!" He turned the pages, fondly. "Here, this is the writing on the Bjorkestorp Stone, a strong magic. A protection spell—and there are more."

"Wait!" Wilson said, urgently. "That one looks familiar—and that one next to it. They seem to reverse each other!"

"Perhaps . . ." The old man frowned, shaking his head. "Not many can read the 'futhork' these days, and opinions differ. You may be right, at that. This one, now, is arguable. Some say it reads 'To him who has . . . more!' Others say it should be 'Return to him who sent you.' I like the second one best."

"So do I. This is what we want, Hendrik. I'm certain of it. I want a copy of that one and then we'll be on our way."

"Nonsense!" the old man said, loudly. "You cannot leave like that. It will offend me. You must at least stay for the night. And, my friend, I know a little of these things. You

will need not one, but five copies of this, in gold paint, on parchment, and I have all the materials. You will have supper and a good sleep and I will see to this !" And Wilson couldn't shake him on that, at all. The prospect of a sudden and explosive fire didn't worry him in the least. It might have been his very indifference which worked the trick. At any rate, I slept well, and by the signs, so did the others.

Next morning, bright and early, the old man presented us with a little strip of parchment each. Wilson thanked him, and instructed us,

"Keep it on your person, at all times. And try to believe in it. We cannot do more, for the moment. And, like it or not, we must be on our way." The old man grumbled, but this time Wilson was firm. "I have undertaken to return," he said, "and deal with the civil aspects of the firing of my house, for one thing. To neglect that would be to invite suspicion and involvement with the law. And we have enough trouble without that. And then we must find ourselves a new base, to set up a counter-operation. Yalna, I had thought of the Grevilles, but you may have a better idea?" She shook her head, and the old man snapped his fingers, suddenly.

"My old head, it rusts, I think. I can help you, still. Listen. My brother's child lives in England. She is a social researcher, like you, Dr. Cadman and a very sharp-minded girl. I have a letter from her, somewhere—wait—I will get it!" He hurried off, and I dug down into my mental files. And it was there, sure enough.

"Gerda Kristian !" I said. "Oh yes, I've heard of her, all right. She had a book out, two years ago. *The English Holiday*. I haven't read it, but I'm told it's a hell of a keen study of the typical English holiday-maker. She is certainly nobody's fool, but I don't see . . ." and then the old man was back, and we did see, because he explained.

"She is writing another book, from the other side," he said. "From the viewpoint of the landlady and the hotel-keeper. She has bought a big old house, on the southern coastline, to take in guests, for payment. I know, I was there myself, only a month ago. I will give you a note, and she will be pleased to provide you with rooms. Yes?"

"Why not?" Wilson shrugged. "It will simplify matters, certainly."

We had a brief stop in London, into which we packed a lot of activity. Wilson rescued the Rolls. He contacted Ferguson and that bit was far from good. We discovered that the Inspector had covered for us as best he could, but that there was no way of diverting a strong element of suspicion that still pointed straight at me. As Wilson explained it, Ferguson was ready to pull all the strings he could, but he had to have some sort of evidence to be able to lay in front of those higher than him, preferably some way of pointing a hot finger at the Seekers. Once the suspicion was on them, it would cool on me. I couldn't see how we were going to achieve that, but Wilson was really getting into gear now.

"Leave it to me," he said, crisply. "I have to consult with my solicitors about the fire, anyway, so I shall have to stay awhile. You four catch a coach, find this address, make yourselves known to the lady and I'll join you by car, just as soon as I've done one or two things."

That is exactly what we did, with just time enough out to set ourselves up in clothing and accessories a bit more suitable to our circumstances. By about five o'clock in the afternoon, there we were, at the door of a great rambling old house, standing just a little way back from the road which links Hythe and Folkestone. The sea churned among the pebbles right behind us, on the other side of the road. The air was warm. The door we stood at was flanked with huge tubs, bursting with flowers. It was a far cry from the rugged brightness of Norway. At this distance, it was hard to believe that all those things had really happened.

"Maybe I'd better handle this," I said, as the door opened, and showed us a puzzled face. "Miss Gerda Kristian? My name is Cadman, Dr. Cyril Cadman, of the Sociometric Centre, California."

"Oh!" she said, and then, "I've heard of that—and I've seen your name, in the Journal, surely? But what brings you here—what can I do for you?"

"We've all come, direct, from your uncle, Professor Hendrik Kristian, in Oslo. I have this note from him, which will introduce us, I think." She took it, looked at the outside, put her head on one side and laughed.

"You had better come in," she decided, and led us along a bright-tiled passage, past great old oak coat-hangers and cupboards, into a spacious room that was warm with sunlight from big french-windows in the far wall. Out there was a

garden where flowers danced alongside a green square of grass. A pleasant room to sit in. "I was just going to make a cup of tea," she said. "If you'll wait just a moment, I'll change to a bigger pot."

Yalna went to stand by the window, looked out, turned round to study the room again, and nodded approvingly.

"I like this," she said. "It is a happy house."

"We could soon change it," I reminded her, grimly. "At least—I could." Then Miss Kristian came back, and busied herself seeing to our comfort. If I'd seen her without knowing, I'd have thought her English enough, and typical, except for her hair, which was so blonde as to be almost silver, and close-curved to her head in a style to remind me of a Greek marble. There was an air of very quiet determination about the way she moved, and in the square line of her jaw and cheekbones. But she was glowingly tanned, startlingly green-eyed, and in no danger at all of suffering by comparison with Yalna or Anna. A very attractive and gracious lady indeed. I'd have estimated her as a well-kept thirty-five, until she settled in a low chair, broke open the note I'd given her, and then let go with a giggle that took twenty years off her age in a twinkling.

"How like Uncle Hendrik," she said. "Listen . . . 'These people are my good friends. They are our kind of people. Now they are homeless and distressed. Help them.' And that's all, apart from his signature. I suppose he thinks that is enough, and, in a way, it is. But would one of you please explain! You don't *look* very distressed!" That put it up to me, so I told her all that was necessary. She made a good audience.

"Let's get one thing clear, right away," I suggested. "We're looking for a place to stay—and we can pay for it. But you're entitled to think that we are dangerous people to have around. Me, anyway. Just say it, and we'll go!" She sat back in her chair thoughtfully, crossed her legs—and they were very nice legs indeed and something inside me said 'Watch it brother. Here we go again!'—and then she laughed.

"Only this morning," she said, "I was seriously thinking about giving up this house, and my project. Uncle Hendrik told you, I think, that I'm working on another book, from the landlady's point of view. I love people—I love their silly, hopeless, helpless ways—but, if they have one defect, it is that they are dull, unimaginative, not really appreciating any of the

tremendously exciting possibilities of life. And this is a dull place. Nothing ever happens. That's what I thought—until now ! Believe me, Dr. Cadman, all of you, you are as welcome as cool water in a desert. To think of it, four, no, five when Dr. Wilson comes, genuine magicians, right here in my own house !”

“ You, too ?” I wondered. “ You, a sociologist—accept magic ?”

“ Of course. You take your beliefs seriously, don't you ?”

“ If you can call them beliefs—if you can compare the findings of science with a lot of ancient superstition—all right !”

“ But you compared them yourself,” she retorted. “ You compared the Ozma profile with the Seekers profile, and they matched. And, if you care to think of it, all your troubles, ever since, have resulted from the fact that you could not accept your own results. You've been running away from that fact.”

“ That's a very good point,” Jones put in, quietly. “ I'm no good when it comes to the deeper parts of philosophy, I know, but isn't it true that magic, superstition and science are basically the same thing, differing only in the method ? You sociologists, for instance, are trying to find out just what goes on in a group, what makes people do what they do, to learn the laws of how a society really works. Isn't that right ?”

Yalna put in, with a smile, “ People cannot live without each other for very long and yet they cannot live *with* each other for very long, either, not without trouble.”

“ Very nicely put,” I agreed, “ and that is our problem, sure. But we go about it in a scientific manner. We study the forces involved, work them out, and, eventually, we will be able to apply them to making a society that will go together without exploding. That's science.”

“ And yet . . .” she said, sweetly, “. . . your so-called superstition had the perfect answer, thousands of years ago, and it has been repeated a thousand times since in a thousand different ways, but it all amounts to the same set of principles, the same phrase covers it. Love one another !” Miss Kristian opened her green eyes very wide, looked at Yalna as if for the first time, then at Anna, then she nodded, as if at some inner satisfaction.

“ This is the real thing,” she said, softly. “ The real thing, at last. I am so glad fate sent you here. You can have no idea what it is like to be among people, and yet not ‘ of ’ them, to know that there isn't one of them would understand what you

were talking about, if you wanted to really talk to them. They are so pitifully small, so cramped in their thinking, so afraid of themselves and the forces they feel inside but do not understand. Like children, afraid of the dark. All their poor lives, it is 'Thou shalt not . . .' for this, and 'Thou shalt not . . .' for that. You . . ." and she looked at me, ". . . are very nearly there, I think. Only fear is holding you back from the last step."

s i x

It may sound crazy, but in that moment I *was* afraid. There was something weird in what was happening. First Yalna, then Wilson, then Anna and Jones, and now this Miss Kristian—all somehow glowing with an inner certainty, a kind of assurance about a whole range of ideas that I couldn't put my finger on at all. It was as if they were talking a foreign language, and yet, just beyond the edge of my mind, I felt as if I should know. It would all be crystal-clear, if I could just get it in focus and my head began to ache as if it was growing from the inside. In my fear I wanted something safe to talk about.

"The Ozma thing," I said, thankful for the inspiration. "That has me completely stopped. Not just that the Seekers match them, in profile, but that they should get so het up about me because I found out. So what?"

"I have been thinking about that," Anna said, surprising us all. "This Ozma is listening for intelligence from space, yes? Suppose they get signals, and can understand them—it would make a great excitement, wouldn't it? Everybody would think—Aha! the people of other stars will have great secrets to tell us. We must work on this. The whole world will be agog, I think. But, suppose the Seekers, also, have got signals, and understand them—and do not wish anyone to know about it—what then?" Jones sat up, excitedly, but there was no need to say it.

They must have seen it on my face, as I fumbled for my brief-case, that precious bag that had never been far away from my hand. I knew, myself, before I looked, but I had to look, just to be satisfied. I spread out the chart on the table, and my fingers were unsteady as I showed them.

"Three curves," I said, cursing myself for having missed it. "Motivation, behaviour—and results. Look, Ozma and the

Seekers match precisely on the first two, but on the third, on results, Ozma shows this, because they have not got anything. No results, yet. Now look at the Seekers 'results' curve ! It's all different. They are really getting results, or think they are!"

"Well done, Anna !" Jones said, and caught his lovely wife in a bear-hug. "As I said before—you're a witch !"

"Three witches together, if you ask me," I said, and Miss Kristian gave me a smile that went right down inside and stung enough to catch my breath. "You realise what this could mean ?" I demanded, shakily. "If the Seekers are using *that* kind of help, we don't stand much chance, for all those tricky runes and charms. These star-people may be thousands of years ahead of us."

"Now you're accepting," Yalna declared. "Now you're thinking along the right lines."

"I'm glad you think so. It isn't getting me anywhere !"

"Never mind, for now," Miss Kristian got up. "Let's be practical, for a moment. Come, I will show you your rooms. There are plenty."

We followed her upstairs, to where the stairway brought us out in the middle of a long passage, with windows along one wall, and room doors along the other. "They are all the same," she explained, "all single rooms, but they all connect with each other, so you can arrange them to suit yourselves. I will go and make preparations for a meal. You can sort yourselves out."

Jones went along to the far end, and he and Anna took the end two rooms. Yalna elected for the next one, so I chose the fourth one, next to hers.

"Unless," I said, "you'd prefer Wilson in there, and I'll take the end one. It's up to you."

"If it's up to me," she said. "I would prefer you in the room next to mine. And the interconnecting door folds back, like this," and she slid it back out of the way. "Now," she came and sat on the bed that was to be mine, very seriously, "why do you think I made that decision ? Come and sit beside me, and see if you can really think, for yourself." I sat, unwillingly.

"This kind of thing doesn't help sensible thinking," I protested, and she laughed, just for a moment. Then she was serious again.

"You mean, really, that you are trying to think about two things at the same time—or, perhaps, think about one thing, and shut out the other? But why do you have to do that? What is wrong with this other thing you are trying not to think about? Is it wrong, wicked?"

"No—I guess it isn't. Not wrong, exactly. It's natural enough, but this is the wrong time, the wrong way."

"Cyril. Answer me a straight yes or no. The way you feel about me, at this moment, is it wrong?" And she had me, there. I didn't know the answer.

"It depends, I suppose, on the way you feel about me. Not knowing that—I don't know whether I'm right or wrong."

"Ah! Good. Now think some more, because you are not quite there, yet. You've heard us talk a lot about love. You heard Anna say, remember, that the bad kind is the kind that wants to limit and confine, to enslave. And she was quite right. Love is the power to do something for someone else. Put it the other way round, if you do something for anyone else—to help them, to make them happy, to add to them in any way—that is love. Love is power, and like all power, it can be used for good or bad. It is badly used when it *makes* anyone else do something they don't want to do, when it takes away, or binds, or hurts. And it can do all of those things, and more. Now, without having to worry about how I feel, you can answer my question. Is your feeling right, or wrong? Would it make you want to bind, hurt, or take anything away from me?"

"Good grief!" I said, "What d'you think I am, a sheik or something? Of course not! I'd never do anything you didn't want me to, or hurt you in any way, or impose any limits on you. You know that!"

"Very well," she smiled, just briefly. "Then stop worrying about the way you feel. Stop trying to push it away. Let it stay, and use it. Think with love, not apart from it. Now—you say the Seekers may have greater powers than we suspect. Possibly. But think of this. As I said before, when we were with old Hendrik Kristian, ever since recorded time, people have known that power came from 'up there'—and for just as long as that, people have known, some people, more wise than others, that love is power, the greatest power of all. The Seekers have not discovered anything new."

"Yes, but . . ."

"But what?"

"That's a different kind of love. There's the feeling, that I have, and there's this 'Love one another' that you mentioned."

"Electricity can light a lamp, drive a motor, warm a room, but it is the same electricity, Cyril. It is all love, merely used in different ways. To put limits on it is to weaken and cripple it. To say, 'Thou shalt not love anyone but me,' is a weakness. Anna and Chappie are married, to conform with a social convention, but you heard Anna renounce the bond, at once, when it threatened to get in the way of helping us. Do you think her love is any the less for that? The Seekers may have made new contacts. They may be powerful. I am not saying they cannot harm us. They may destroy us. But that will be because we fail to use what we have, not because they have anything better. You think about it."

That big room was darkening when I went downstairs again. Our hostess was busy laying a fire in the huge grate. The idea jarred me.

"Surely not!" I said, going over, and she looked up, and smiled.

"I won't light it. But it's as well to have it ready. The evenings get cool along this coast, even in summer."

"I hope this evening gets cool, all right," I told her, and I meant it. I was worried, and still confused. Far too much had come into my mind in too short a time for me to be able to feel easy about any of it. The others came down and we had a very pleasant supper. We talked and Miss Kristian was a wonderful hostess, with a fund of penetrating stories of the people she had observed and not the least objection to talking 'shop,' but I was the skeleton at the feast, and I knew it. It wasn't just that I was the marked man. I also knew that I didn't fit. The rest of them had gone together like the fingers on one hand, and I was the sore thumb. What should have been a very pleasant evening began to get electric by about ten o'clock, with them doing their best to gloss over my lack of co-operation.

At last Yalna stirred in her chair, got up, took me by the hand, and said, "Come for a walk in the garden a moment, Cyril. Just for a breath of air." I went, gladly, and yet apprehensively, guessing that she was going to give me a talking-to.

We went out through the french-windows, and I shut them behind me, carefully. There was a great white moon. She stood on the edge of the grass, fairy-like in that light, with

silver on her neck and shoulders and the curve of her breasts, and a strange gleam in her eye. "Come!" she whispered, and put her arms around my neck. "Once, when I was troubled, you helped me—now let me help you." Her lips came to mine, eagerly, almost hungrily, and with a fire that matched anything the Seekers could turn up. I have had no great experience of women, but if that wasn't open surrender, then I'm all wrong. It took my breath, anyway. After a time I couldn't possibly estimate, she let go, drew her head back, and looked at me.

"For heaven's sake!" she whispered. "What *are* you afraid of? Try it again, and this time—give—the way you did when you wanted to help Anna!"

She put up her mouth again, and I felt as if something inside of me fought for a desperate moment, and then died—and the whole world spun off into a warm red glow. Time really stood still, in that moment. I could feel her quivering like a harp-string against me, and I was none too steady on my own feet when she let go of me the second time.

"There!" she gasped, her eyes scorching up at me. "Remember *that* feeling, and stop trying to shut it off."

"You're saying I shouldn't control myself," I protested, breathlessly, and she shook her head.

"Not at all. Control, yes. But control means being able to turn it on, and use it, not strangling it with a lot of stuffy old notions about right and wrong. Come on, we can go back in, now."

seven

The change in that room was apparent the minute we stepped inside, and the others had noticed it, too. It was hot—and getting hotter. Their faces were serious, but not afraid, yet.

"We might as well get out," I said, roughly. "This is it, the same old routine. So much for all the spells and the witchcraft. Come on, what are you waiting for? You want to be fried alive!"

"No—just a minute!" Yalna touched my arm, and shut the window behind her. "I think this is where the mistake has been, all the time. Cyril, who should know better than I do that there is no evil on you, at this moment? You are clean. And, think a moment, in all the fires, you haven't ever been hurt, or burned, have you?"

"That kind of good luck isn't going to hold up much longer, not if we stand here yakking about it."

"But that is exactly what we must do," the sweat was gleaming on her, now, and on the rest of them. "Somehow, by running away from it, we give it leave to strike. We ought to stay and fight it off!"

"That's great!" I snapped. "But how?" and I looked at the rest of them for possible inspiration. "The charms don't seem to be working, you'll notice!" Yalna put her finger to the gadget on her wrist, the 'talker' that had rested, securely, in Wilson's bag all through our desperate times, and I knew that she was seeking his help. If he was wearing the counterpart. If he was in range. If he knew what to do. Too many 'ifs' altogether. But I heard his 'voice,' almost at once.

"What's wrong?"

"The heat is here, where we are, just the same as before. Where are you and what shall we do?"

"I'm only about five minutes away, by car, and coming as fast as I can. Stay put. Get a bucket of water, or similar, and something that will withstand heat, a plate or dish of some kind—and strip, all of you, down to the skin . . ."

"I heard that," I said, loudly, "and it's raving madness. We can't stay here, and just wait for it. And do a strip-tease into the bargain!"

"I heard, also," Anna retorted. "And I shall stay," Miss Kristian rocked me completely when she nodded.

"I heard it, too. I'll get a bucket, and I have an asbestos ring that will do very nicely, I think." And they were all stark staring mad! There was nothing I could do but watch them, and wonder whether or not I was dreaming. I saw Yalna stoop and seize the hem of her dress and peel it up over her head in one movement. Anna was unbuttoning as fast as she could go. Jones flung his jacket in a corner, and stared at me.

"You'd better strip," he said, "or run for it, one or the other—you haven't much time!" Again I was struck by the way they all seemed to have some inside store of dynamite that exploded into action when the time was ripe, like now. No burlesque-show team ever got rid of their clothes faster, I'll swear, or so casually.

Miss Kristian came back with the bucket and a grey-white disc of stuff, put them down, and unfastened her skirt as if it was the most natural thing in the world. I knew this was

insane, but it was too much for me to ignore, so, feeling like a fool, I, too, began to shed my clothes. Then I heard the hum and hiss of a car, and a sharp rap at the door.

"I'll go," I said, and my laugh wasn't exactly sane, just then. "I'll have to. Any one of the rest of you would be arrested!"

Wilson brushed past me, almost on the run, and straight along into that room as if he'd lived there all his life, shedding his jacket as he went.

"Good!" he said, curtly, as I hurried after him. "We have a moment or two. Miss Kristian, this must seem a disgraceful liberty . . ."

"It's all right, Ken—she's one of us," Yalna cried, from the floor as she peeled off a stocking. "What do we do now?" The room was like an inferno, and I couldn't understand why it hadn't gone up in flames long ago. Wilson tore at his collar and tie.

"Push back all the furniture—right out to the walls. Leave the middle of the floor clear!" he said, and Jones, stark naked and streaming with sweat, seized the nearest chair, sent it skidding. I scrambled out of the rest of my gear in time to give a hand. It was like a mad-house for a moment or two. Then Wilson took the bucket, went to the absolute centre of the silver-grey carpet, gauging it by sighting the corners—and upended it, all in one splash. He tossed the empty bucket aside, got the asbestos disc, laid it, again, in the dead centre, on the sopping carpet, and went for his jacket.

"Let me have your runes," he demanded, and we turned them over. He took them, with a big sheet of silver foil that had great red scrawls on it, placed the lot on the plate, and stood back.

"Gather round, in a circle, hand in hand, alternate . . ." and he reached for Miss Kristian's hand, and Anna's. She took hold of Jones and he reached for Yalna. She gave me a hard look, for all the perspiration streaming down her face, and that look asked, as plain as if she'd said it 'Are you with us?' What could I do? I took her hand, and Miss Kristian's—and we were in a circle around the heap of parchments.

"Listen carefully," Wilson said, very softly. "I have very little time to spare on explanations, but doubts removed are weaknesses eliminated. We are naked, not just because it facilitates the use of living energy, but also because the flame we wish to withstand cannot burn us—of itself. It cannot burn

living matter. This is the fire of which ancestral memories still remain in old concepts of hell, wherein people burn and burn, and are not consumed. But make no mistake, this heat *can* set fire to non-living matter—and *that* can burn us. So we are naked. We will try, now, to contain the heat within our circle. All I ask of you is that you give—give me the power of your love—all you have.”

The heat was fantastic, now. It scraped at my nostrils as I breathed, and I could feel my bare skin tingle with the intensity of it. Wilson began to chant, in a strange, awkward voice, a string of strange sounds, like nothing I had ever heard, and, all at once, the heat moved. It was quite distinct and positive. Instead of being all around, it was in front of me, and my back was cold. And it was now like the breath from a steel-mill furnace.

“We have contained the fire !” Wilson spoke in a great big voice, now. “We have it within our grasp, but we shall not burn. Though it were ten times hotter . . . we . . . shall . . . not . . . burn !”

All at once, in the middle of that awful heat, I remembered what Yalna had said, and I saw her face from the corner of my eye. It was calm, relaxed, almost, child-like in its confidence. ‘Give !’ she had said, and that feeling came back—of utter surrender. And, with it, came a phrase from the Bible, that I hadn’t thought of in far too many years. ‘Perfect love casteth out fear.’ As if she knew what I was thinking, her fingers twitched in mine, and I managed to give hers a squeeze in return. But the heat was frightful, now. I could feel Miss Kristian shift and squirm, and the skin of my face, chest and stomach cringed as if somebody was passing a soldering-iron over it. Breathing was a torment. We might have been standing at the mouth of Hell itself.

Wilson raised his voice again, strong and harsh, this time, but with careful precision, as if he was making the effort to get each crackling syllable just right. And all at once there was a drastic change in the broiling inferno, a sudden ‘pop,’ and then a flare of searing light. I shut my eyes tight, automatically, but the fierce glare struck through my eyelids. A ball of white-hot fire hung in the air in the midst of us, and grew. The very air I breathed was flame. I would have screamed, if I’d been able to draw enough breath to do it. How on earth Wilson kept on

talking, I shall never know. I heard him, but it was as if he was miles away, and all of me was knotted up in the agonised effort to cringe away from that incredible blast of fire.

His voice grew louder, more dominant, sounded a note of triumph. "We have the flame!" he shouted. "We hold it—and now, we return it, whence it came!" and he spat out a great roaring word—again, a third time—and, like the blowing of a fuse, that great blow-torch glare was gone. The agony lingered, but it was only the echo, the reaction. The fire was gone. I sucked in a trembling, fearful breath, opened my eyes and the room was full of vapour. It took me a dazed minute to realise that it came from the wet carpet at my feet. Then, as I was about to speak, I felt Yalna sag and begin to fall, and Miss Kristian, on the other side, and Anna was going down, too. A frantic blink over my shoulder showed me that Wilson had caught Miss Kristian, and I was just in time to get Yalna before her knees went altogether.

"The weaker sex," Wilson said, with a weary grin. "So-called because they give everything they have, when called upon, and naturally suffer the most. You know the room arrangements? We had better put this lot to bed, quickly. They will be fine in an hour or two, but it is going to get bitterly cold in here in short order—and the hour is late, anyway. There's nothing more to be done, this night." Jones scooped up his precious Anna with a tenderness hard to believe in such a big man.

"Follow me," he said. "I'll show you where the rooms are," and he led on. It was fine for him, and Wilson didn't seem to know the meaning of the word 'fatigue,' the way he lifted Miss Kristian in his arms and marched off, but I knew that I ached all over, and that the fire we had just faced might not burn, but it certainly felt like it, to me. I expected my skin to crack and blister at any minute. But I made the effort, gathered Yalna like a baby, and staggered after.

She was no baby, but a hefty well-made girl and while I had nothing but pure admiration for her bountiful curves, I was glad enough to put them down on her bed when I reached it. I very nearly collapsed right there by her side. As it was, I sat a long moment, to get my breath, and to admire.

Then she stirred, blinked her eyes, and opened them wide.

"Keep still," I said, getting up. "I'll bring you a cup of tea or something, just as soon as I can get one made."

"Please . . ." she said softly, "you bring it !"

Downstairs, I made my way to the kitchen, put the kettle on, and in a moment or two, Wilson had joined me. He smiled when he saw what I was up to.

"First-class idea," he approved. "Make it hot and strong, with plenty of sugar. Miss Kristian is awake, too. I think she'd like some. A remarkable woman, that. An exceedingly straight and incisive mind. And you did well, too, Cadman. You gave much more effectively, that time."

Jones came along the passage to the kitchen, frowning. "I went to rescue my clothes," he said, "from that room and it's like an ice-box now."

"Yes—we discharged quite a lot of heat. We shall have to be up early tomorrow, and restore as much of the damage as we can. I hope Miss Kristian will let us pay for the rest. That carpet is ruined, and there's a scorch on the ceiling overhead."

"I think that'll be all right," I said. "Thing is, just what did we achieve, if anything?"

"We have given them something to think of, certainly. I doubt if we've destroyed them, but they may feel inclined to leave you alone in the future, Cadman."

Wilson reached for the kettle as it started to boil, and poured. I had my doubts, and I could see that Jones felt the same way. Between us, we gave him the gist of what Yalna had said, about contact with intelligence from space, and he listened, thoughtfully. "You may well be right," he murmured, "in that they have made some sort of contact. That is something I must look into. If they can do it, so can we. And I can assure you of this, they are mis-using what power they have. That much I am certain of. Any power used to *destroy* is mis-used, is perverted. That is a weakness. It can be our strength, just as it was tonight. Right intentions, Cadman, make all the difference. That is why evil can never win, in the long run."

"That's a great philosophy," I said, "but it's just a pious hope, after all, isn't it?" He gave me a wry smile, and then shook his head.

"You will have to clear out your own misconceptions," he said, gently, "I cannot do that for you. But think of this. To mis-use, to pervert anything, is to weaken it. And evil is but good, perverted. So evil can't win. Now, two for you . . ." he poured, added sugar. "Two for you, Chappie—and I'll take two. Drink, and get warmly wrapped up. Sleep well—

and we'll see what tomorrow brings." I took my two cups and went up to Yalna's room, knocked, and went in, as she called. The cups were chattering in my fingers. All at once, I was cold. As she pushed back the bed-clothes and sat up, I could see her shivering, too, but she smiled and held out her hand.

"Looks good," she whispered. "I need something. I'm cold!"

"Me too. Wilson says it's the reaction from throwing fireballs. How do you feel, otherwise? Burned?"

"No, just cold. Love can't burn, not to show scars. You're not burned, are you?" I shivered so that my cup rattled against my teeth as I emptied it, and I saw her shiver, convulsively, too, as she laid her cup by the bed. Then she put out her hand. "You're shivering, Cyril. Come, let me warm you, and you warm me. I promise I won't change into a toad . . ."

There's nothing quite the same as the cool clear light of early morning for scraping the glamour off things, but it didn't work this time. When we met around the table for breakfast at eight the next morning, the evidence was still there to convince us that last night hadn't been any illusion. We were all set to make a belated apology, but Miss Kristian wouldn't hear of it.

"For the very first time in my life," she declared, "I'm with people I can understand, and I've done something really worthwhile."

"You're sure we have achieved something?" Wilson queried, and she was emphatic. Her green eyes were alight with a new fire.

"I've known, for a long time, that I have gifts. I've tried to conceal them, because other people tend to laugh, or to scoff. But I know you'll do neither. And I tell you, I know that we have struck a great blow against these wicked people. I can feel it." She had to get up, then, and go to answer a loud rattle on the front door.

"Gerda is an astonishing woman," Wilson murmured. "I doubt if I've met a more outstanding case of latent power. We have been very fortunate, here." I was all set to agree with him when there was a heavy tread in the passage, and I saw a familiar, bristling, dour face show up. The happy feeling went away.

"Ferguson!" Wilson got up, quickly. "What brings you here?"

"I wanted to carry this news myself," the Inspector said, gruffly. "I'd the idea you'd want to know about it. Now, I don't know what you've been up to, but I take it you were all here, all last night? From, say, eleven o'clock onwards?" Gerda had come to stand by him, her eyes bright.

"They were my guests," she said, "and all here, from ten o'clock. Why?"

"The Seekers of Knowledge," he said, in a curiously strangled voice, "have lodges, if that's what they call them, in London, in the Fulham Road, in Bristol, Newcastle and Edinburgh as well. I should say they *had*! All of them, everyone, caught fire and were completely destroyed, last night, at about eleven o'clock! I heard the eye-witness reports. You'll understand, we've had people watching them. And each one says it was fast, all at once, like an explosion. Just the same way your house went, in fact, Wilson."

"And you think we had something to do with it?" Wilson murmured, with a very faint smile. Ferguson scowled, darkly.

"I know damn well you had—but that's between me and my conscience. All I have to say, here, is this. We have all the evidence we want, now, to kill the suspicions about Dr. Cadman here. Enquiries will move in a different direction, now. For one thing, we've put out a general alarm for the European Grand Master of the Seekers—chap by the name of Xavier Lindsay, because we'd like to talk to him. Seems to have vanished into thin air."

"Hope you catch up with him, Inspector," I said. "It's nice to know that the monkey is off my back, anyway."

"Ay, I thought you'd want to know that."

A good man, the Inspector, and I'm not decrying him, but I wouldn't be writing this now if I'd had to depend on his kind of law. It was my good fortune that I fell among friends. I can only hope they will never have cause to regret making me one of them—because I have the feeling that we haven't heard the last of the Seekers.

—John Rackham

The Age of the Young Kingdoms, which came after the Age of the Bright Empire, was an age of heroes. There were many of these and Elric of Melniboné, of course, was chief among them. But there were others and many of the hero tales of that Age centre upon a mysterious city, which some doubt really existed. This city was named Tanelorn . . .

TO RESCUE TANELORN . . .

BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK

o n e

Beyond the tall and ominous glass-green forest of Troos, well to the North and unheard of in Bakshaan, Elwher or any other city of the Young Kingdoms, on the shifting shores of the Sighing Desert lay Tanelorn, a lonely, long-ago city, loved by those it sheltered.

Tanelorn had a peculiar nature in that it welcomed and held the wanderer. To its peaceful streets and low houses came the gaunt, the savage, the brutalised, the tormented and in Tanelorn they found rest.

Now, most of these troubled travellers who dwelt in peaceful Tanelorn had thrown off earlier allegiances to the Lords of Chaos who, as gods, took more than a mild interest in the

affairs of men. It happened, therefore, that these same Lords grew to resent the unlikely city of Tanelorn and, at length, decided to act.

They instructed one of their number (more they could not send) Lord Narjhan, to journey to Nadsokor, the City of Beggars, and raise an army that would attack undefended Tanelorn and destroy it and its inhabitants. So he did this, arming his ragged army and promising them many things.

Then, like a ferocious tide, did the beggar rabble set off to tear down Tanelorn and slay its residents. A great torrent of men and women in rags, on crutches, blind, maimed, but moving steadily, ominously, implacably Northwards toward the Sighing Desert.

In Tanelorn dwelt the Red Archer, Rackhir, from the Eastlands beyond the Sighing Desert, beyond the Weeping Waste. Rackhir had been born a Warrior Priest, a servant of the Lords of Chaos, but had forsaken this life for the quieter pursuits of thievery and learning. A man with harsh features slashed from the bone of his skull, strong, fleshless nose, deep eye-cavities, a thin mouth and a thin beard. He wore a red skull-cap, decorated with a hawk's feather, a red jerkin, tight-fitting and belted at the waist, red breeks and red boots. It was as if all the blood in him had transferred itself to his gear and left him drained. He was happy, however, in Tanelorn, the city which made all such men happy, and felt he would die there if men died there. He did not know if they did.

One day he saw Brut of Lashmar, a great, blonde-headed noble of shamed name, ride wearily, yet urgently, through the low wall-gate of the city of peace. Brut's silver harness and trappings were begrimed, his yellow cloak torn and his broad-brimmed hat battered. A small crowd collected around him as he rode into the city square and halted. Then he gave him news.

"Beggars from Nadsokor, many thousands, move against our Tanelorn," he said, "and they are led by Narjhan of Chaos."

Now, all the men in there were soldiers of some kind, good ones for the most part, and they were confident warriors, but few in number. A horde of beggars, led by such a being as Narjhan, could destroy Tanelorn, they knew.

"Should we, then, leave Tanelorn?" said Uroch of Nieva, a young, wasted man who had been a drunkard.

"We owe this city too much to desert her," Rackhir said. "We should defend her—for her sake and ours. There will never be such a city again."

Brut leaned forward in his saddle and said: "In principle, Red Archer, I am in agreement with you. But principle is not enough without deeds. How would you suggest we defend this low-walled city against siege and the powers of Chaos?"

"We should need help," Rackhir replied, "supernatural help if need be."

"Would the Grey Lords help us?" Zas the One-handed asked the question. He was an old, torn wanderer who had once gained a throne and lost it again.

"Aye—the Grey Lords!" Several voices chorused this hopefully.

"Who are the Grey Lords?" said Uroch, but no one heard him.

"They are not inclined to aid anyone at all," Zas the One-handed pointed out, "but surely a neutral city such as Tanelorn, coming as it does under neither the Forces of Law nor the Lords of Chaos, would be worth their while preserving. After all, they have no loyalties either."

"I'm for seeking the Grey Lords' aid," Brut nodded. "What of the rest of us?" There was general agreement, then silence when they realised that they knew of no means of contacting the mysterious and insouciant beings. At last Zas pointed this out.

Rackhir said: "I know a seer—a hermit who lives in the Sighing Desert. Perhaps he can help?"

"I think that, after all, we should not waste time looking for supernatural assistance against this beggar rabble," Uroch said. "Let us prepare, instead, to meet the attack with physical means."

"You forget," Brut said wearily, "that they are led by Narjhan of Chaos. He is not human and has the whole strength of Chaos behind him. We know that the Grey Lords are pledged neither to Law nor to Chaos but will sometimes help either side if the whim takes them. They are our only chance."

"Why not seek the aid of the Forces of Law, sworn enemies of Chaos and mightier than the Grey Lords?" Uroch said.

"Because Tanelorn is a neutral city owing allegiance to neither side. We are all of us men and women who have broken our pledge to Chaos but have made no new one to Law. The Forces of Law are just but, in matters of this kind, will help only those sworn to them. We are renegades—the Grey Lords only may protect us, if they would." So said Zas.

"I will go to find my seer," Rackhir the Red Archer said, "and if he knows how I may reach the Domain of the Grey Lords, then I'll continue straight on, for there is so little time. If I reach them and solicit their help you will soon know I have done so. If not, you must die in Tanelorn's defence and, if I live, I will join you in that last battle."

"Very well," Brut agreed, "go quickly, Red Archer. Let one of your own arrows be the measure of your speed."

And taking little with him save his bone bow and quiver of scarlet-fletched arrows, Rackhir set off for the Sighing Desert.

From Nadsokor, South West through the land of Vilmir, even through the squalid country of Org which has in it the dreadful forest of Troos, there was flame and black horror in the wake of the beggar horde, and insolent, disdainful of them though he led them, rode a being completely clad in black armour with a voice that rang hollow in the helm. People fled away at their approach and the lands of Vilmir, Org and Ilmiora were made barren by their passing. Most knew what had happened, that the beggar citizens of Nadsokor had, contrary to their traditions of centuries, vomited from their city in a wild, menacing horde. Someone had armed them—someone had made them go Northwards and Westwards towards the Sighing Desert. But who was the one who led them? Ordinary folk did not know. And why did they head for the Sighing Desert? There was no city beyond Karlaak, which they had skirted, only the Sighing Desert—and beyond that the edge of the world. Was that their destination? Were they heading, lemming-like, to their destruction? Everyone hoped so, in their hate for the horrible horde.

Rackhir rode through the mournful wind of the Sighing Desert, his face and eyes protected against the particles of

sand which flew about. He was thirsty and had been riding a day. Ahead of him at last were the rocks he sought.

He reached the rocks and called above the wind.

"Lamsar !"

The hermit came out in answer to Rackhir's shout. He was dressed in oiled leather to which sand clung. His beard, too, was encrusted with sand and his skin seemed to have taken on the colour and texture of the desert. He recognised Rackhir immediately, by his dress, beckoned him into the cave and disappeared back inside. Rackhir dismounted and led his horse to the cave entrance and went in.

Lamsar was seated on a smooth rock. "You are welcome, Red Archer," he said, "and I perceive by your manner that you wish information from me and that your mission is urgent."

"I seek the help of the Grey Lords, Lamsar," said Rackhir.

The old hermit smiled. It was as if a fissure had suddenly appeared in a rock. "To risk the journey through the Five Gates, your mission must be important. I will tell you how to reach the Grey Lords, but the road is a difficult one."

"I'm willing to take it," Rackhir replied, "for Tanelorn is threatened and the Grey Lords could help her."

"Then you must pass through the First Gate, which lies in our own dimension. I will help you find it."

"And what must I do then?"

"You must pass through all five gates. Each gateway leads to a world which lies beyond and within our own dimension. On each world you must speak with the dwellers there. Some are friendly to men, some are not, but all must answer your question : "Where lies the next Gate?" though some may seek to stop you passing. The last gate leads to the Grey Lords' Domain."

"And the first gate?"

"That lies anywhere on Earth. I will find it for you now."

Lamsar composed himself to meditate and Rackhir, who had expected some sort of gaudy miracle-working from the old man, was disappointed.

Several hours went by until Lamsar said : "The gate is outside. Memorise the following : If X is equal to the spirit of humanity, then the combination of the two must be of double power, therefore the spirit of humanity always contains the power to dominate itself."

"A strange equation," said Rackhir.

"Aye—but memorise it, meditate upon it and then we will leave."

"We—you as well?"

"I think so."

Rackhir liked Lamsar, but the hermit was old. He did not want him on the journey. But then he realised that the hermit's knowledge could be of use to him, so did not object. He thought upon the equation and, as he thought, his mind seemed to glitter and become diffused until he was in a strange trance and all his powers felt greater, both those of mind and body. The hermit got up and Rackhir followed him. They went out of the cave-mouth but, instead of the Sighing Desert, there was a hazy cloud of blue shimmering light ahead and when they had passed through this, in a second, they found themselves in the foothills of a low mountain-range and below them, in a valley, were villages. The villages were strangely laid out, all the houses in a wide circle about a huge amphitheatre containing, at its centre, a circular dais.

"It will be interesting to learn the reason why these villages are so laid out" Lamsar said, and they began to move down into the valley.

As they reached the bottom and came close to one of the villages, people came gaily out and danced joyfully towards them. They stopped in front of Rackhir and Lamsar and, jumping from foot to foot as he greeted them, the leader spoke.

"You are strangers, we can tell—and you are welcome to all we have, food, accommodation and entertainment."

The two men thanked them graciously and accompanied them back to the circular village. The amphitheatre was made of mud and seemed to have been stamped out, hollowed into, the ground encompassed by the houses. The leader of the villagers took them to his house and offered them food.

"You have come to us at a Rest Time," he said, "but do not worry, things will soon commence again. My name is Yerleroo."

"We seek the next Gate," Lamsar said politely, "and our mission is urgent. You will forgive us if we do not stay long?"

"Come," said Yerleroo, "things are about to commence. You will see us at our best, and must join us."

All the villagers had assembled in the amphitheatre, surrounding the platform in the centre. Most of them were light-

skinned and light-haired, gay and smiling, excited—but a few were evidently of a different race, dark, black-haired and these were sullen.

Sensing something ominous in what he saw, Rackhir asked the question directly: "Where is the next Gate?"

Yerleroo hesitated, his mouth worked and then he smiled. "Where the winds meet," he said.

Rackhir declared angrily: "That's no answer."

"Yes it is," said Lamsar softly behind him. "A fair answer."

"Now we shall dance," Yerleroo said. "First you shall watch our dance and then you shall join in."

"Dance?" said Rackhir, wishing he had brought a sword, or at least a dagger.

"Yes—you will like it. Everyone likes it. You will find it will do you good."

"What if we do not wish to dance?"

"You must—it is for your own good, be assured."

"And he—" Rackhir pointed at one of the sullen men. "Does he enjoy it?"

"It is for his own good."

Yerleroo clapped his hands and at once the fair-haired people leapt into a frenetic, senseless dance. Some of them sang. The sullen people did not sing. After a little hesitation, they began to prance dully about, their frowning features contrasting with their jerking bodies. Soon the whole village was dancing, whirling, singing a monotonous song.

Yerleroo flashed by, whirling. "Come, join in now."

"We had better leave," Lamsar said with a faint smile. They backed away.

Yerleroo saw them. "No—you must not leave—you must dance."

They turned and ran as fast as the old man could go. The dancing villagers changed the direction of their dance and began to whirl menacingly towards them in a horrible semblance of gaiety.

"There's nothing for it," Lamsar said and stood his ground, observing them through ironic eyes. "The mountain gods must be invoked. A pity, for sorcery wearies me. Let us hope their magic extends to this plane. *Gordar!*"

Words in an unusually harsh language issued from Lamsar's old mouth. The whirling villagers came on.

Lamsar pointed at them.

The villagers became suddenly petrified and slowly, disturbingly, their bodies caught in a hundred positions, turned to smooth, black basalt.

"It was for their own good," Lamsar smiled grimly. "Come, to the place where the winds meet," and he took Rackhir there quite swiftly.

At the place where the winds met they found the second gateway, a column of amber-coloured flame, shot through with streaks of green. They entered it and, instantly, were in a world of dark, seething colour. Above them was a sky of murky red in which other colours shifted, agitated, changing. Ahead of them lay a forest, dark, blue, black, heavy, mottled green, the tops of its trees moving like a wild tide. It was a howling land of unnatural phenomena.

Lamsar pursed his lips. "On this plane Chaos rules, we must get to the next gate swiftly for obviously the Lords of Chaos will seek to stop us."

"Is it always like this?" Rackhir gasped.

"It is always boiling midnight—but the rest, it changes with the moods of the Lords. There are no rules at all."

They pressed on through the bounding, blossoming scenery as it erupted and changed around them. Once they saw a huge winged figure in the sky, smoky yellow and roughly man-shaped.

"Vezhan," Lamsar said, "let's hope he did not see us."

"Vezhan!" Rackhir whispered the name—for it was to Vezhan that he had once been loyal.

They crept on, uncertain of their direction or even of their speed in that disturbing land.

t w o

At length, they came to the shores of a peculiar ocean.

It was a grey, heaving, timeless sea, a mysterious sea which stretched into infinity. There could be no other shores beyond this rolling plain of water. No other lands or rivers or dark, cool woods, no other men or women or ships. It was a sea which led to nowhere. It was complete to itself—a sea.

Over this timeless ocean hovered a brooding ochre sun which cast moody shadows of black and green across the

water, giving the whole scene something of the look of being enclosed in a vast cavern, for the sky above was gnarled and black with ancient clouds. And all the while the doom-carried crash of breakers, the lonely, fated monotony of the ever-rearing white-topped waves; the sound which portended neither death nor life nor war nor peace—simply existence and shifting inharmony. They could go no further.

"This has the air of our death about it," Rackhir said shivering.

The sea roared and tumbled, the sound of it increasing to a fury, daring them to go on towards it, welcoming them with wild temptation—offering them nothing but achievement—the achievement of death.

Lamsar said: "It is not my fate to wholly perish." But then they were running back towards the forest, feeling that the strange sea was pouring up the beach towards them. They looked back and saw that it had gone no further, that the breakers were less wild, the sea more calm. Lamsar was a little way behind Rackhir.

The Red Archer gripped his hand and hauled him towards him as if he had rescued the old man from a whirlpool. They remained there, mesmerised, for a long time, while the sea called to them and the wind was a cold caress on their flesh.

In the bleak brightness of the alien shore, under a sun which gave no heat, their bodies shone like stars in the night and they turned towards the forest, quietly.

"Are we trapped, then, in this world of Chaos?" Rackhir said at length. "If we meet someone, they will offer us harm—how can we ask our question?"

Then there emerged from the huge forest a great figure, naked and gnarled like the trunk of a tree, green as lime, but the face was jovial.

"Greetings, unhappy renegades," it said.

"Where is the next gate?" said Lamsar quickly.

"You almost entered it, but turned away," laughed the giant. "That sea does not exist—it is there to stop travellers from passing through the gate."

"It exists here, in the world of Chaos," Rackhir said thickly.

"You could say so—but what exists in Chaos save the disorders of the minds of gods gone mad?"

Rackhir had strung his bone bow and fitted an arrow to the string, but he did it in the knowledge of his own hopelessness.

"Do not shoot the arrow," said Lamsar softly. "Not yet." And he stared at the arrow and muttered.

The giant advanced carelessly towards them, unhurried.

"It will please me to exact the price of your crimes from you," it said, "for I am Hionhurn the Executioner. You will find your death pleasant—but your fate unbearable." And he came closer, his clawed hands outstretched.

"Shoot!" croaked Lamsar and Rackhir brought the bow-string to his cheek, pulled it back with might and released the arrow at the giant's heart. "Run!" cried Lamsar, and in spite of their forebodings they ran back down the shore towards the frightful sea. They heard the giant groan behind them as they reached the edge of the sea and, instead of running into water, found themselves in a range of stark mountains.

"No mortal arrow could have delayed him," Rackhir said. "How did you stop him?"

"I used an old charm—the Charm of Justice, which, when applied to any weapon, makes it strike at the unjust."

"But why did it hurt Hionhurn, an immortal?" Rackhir asked.

"There is no justice in the world of Chaos—something constant and inflexible, whatever its nature, must harm any servant of the Lords of Chaos."

"We have passed through the third gate," Rackhir said, unstringing his bow, "and have the fourth and fifth to find. Two dangers have been avoided—but what new ones will we encounter now?"

"Who knows?" said Lamsar, and they walked on through the rocky mountain pass and entered a forest that was cool, even though the sun had reached its zenith and was glaring down through parts of the thick foliage. There was an air of ancient calm about the place. They heard unfamiliar bird-calls and saw tiny golden birds which were also new to them.

"There is something calm and peaceful about this place—I almost distrust it," Rackhir said, but Lamsar pointed ahead silently.

Rackhir saw a large domed building, magnificent in marble and blue mosaic. It stood in a clearing of yellow grass and the marble caught the sun, flashing like fire.

They neared the domed construction and saw that it was supported by big marble columns set into a platform of milky jade. In the centre of the platform, a stairway of blue-stone curved upwards and disappeared into a circular aperture. There were wide windows set into the sides of the raised building but they could not see inside. There were no inhabitants visible and it would have seemed strange to the pair if there had been. They crossed the yellow glade and stepped on to the jade platform. It was warm, as if it had been exposed to the sun. They almost slipped on the smooth stone.

They reached the blue steps and mounted them, staring upwards, but they could still see nothing. They did not attempt to ask themselves why they were so assuredly invading the building; it seemed quite natural that they should do what they were doing. There was no alternative. There was an air of familiarity about the place. Rackhir felt it but did not know why. Inside was a cool, shadowy hall, a blend of soft darkness and bright sunlight which entered by the windows. The floor was pearl-pink and the ceiling deep scarlet. The hall reminded Rackhir of a womb.

Partially hidden by deep shadow was a small doorway and beyond it, steps. Rackhir looked questioningly at Lamsar. "Do we proceed in our exploration?"

"We must—to have our question answered, if possible."

They climbed the steps and found themselves in a smaller hall similar to the one beneath them. This hall, however, was furnished with twelve wide thrones placed in a semi-circle in the centre. Against the wall, near the door, were several chairs, upholstered in purple fabric. The thrones were of gold, decorated with fine silver, padded with white cloth.

A door behind the throne opened and a tall, fragile-looking man appeared, followed by others whose faces were almost identical. Only their robes were noticeably different. Their faces were pale, almost white, their noses straight, their lips thin but not cruel. Their eyes were unhuman—green-flecked eyes which stared outwards with sad composure. The leader of the tall men looked at Rackhir and Lamsar. He nodded and waved a pale, long-fingered hand gracefully.

"Welcome," he said. His voice was high and frail, like a girl's, but beautiful in its modulation. The other eleven men seated themselves in the thrones but the first man, who had spoken, remained standing. "Sit down, please," he said.

Rackhir and Lamsar sat down on two of the purple chairs.

"How did you come here?" enquired the man.

"Through the gates from Chaos," Lamsar replied.

"And were you seeking our world?"

"No—we travel towards the Domain of the Grey Lords."

"I thought so, for your people rarely visit us save by accident."

"Where are we?" asked Rackhir as the man seated himself in the remaining throne.

"In a place beyond time. Once our land was part of the earth you know, but in the dim past it became separated from it. Our bodies, unlike yours, are immortal. We choose this, but we are not bound to our flesh, as you are."

"I don't understand," frowned Rackhir. "What are you saying?"

"I have said what I can in the simplest terms understandable to you. If you do not know what I say than I can explain no further. We are called the Guardians—though we guard nothing. We are warriors, but we fight nothing."

"What else do you do?" enquired Rackhir.

"We exist. You will want to know where the next gateway lies?"

"Yes."

"Refresh yourselves here, and then we shall show you the gateway."

"What is your function?" asked Rackhir.

"To function," said the man.

"You are unhuman!"

"We are human. *You* spend your lives chasing that which is within you and that which you can find in any other human being—but you will not look for it there—you must follow more glamorous paths—to waste your time in order to discover that you have wasted your time. I am glad that we are no longer like you—but I wish that it were lawful to help you further. This, however, we may not do."

"Ours is no meaningless quest," said Lamsar quietly, with respect. "We go to rescue Tanelorn."

"Tanelorn?" the man said softly. "Does Tanelorn still remain?"

"Aye," said Rackhir, "and shelters tired men who are grateful for the rest she offers." Now he realised why the building had been familiar—it had the same quality, but intensified, as Tanelorn.

"Tanelorn was the last of our cities," said the Guardian. "Forgive us for judging you—most of the travellers who pass through this plane are searchers, restless, with no real purpose, only excuses, imaginary reasons for journeying on. You must love Tanelorn to brave the dangers of the gateways?"

"We do," said Rackhir, "and I am grateful that you built her."

"We built her for ourselves, but it is good that others have used her well—and she them."

"Will you help us?" Rackhir said. "For Tanelorn?"

"We cannot—it is not lawful. Now, refresh yourselves and be welcome."

The two travellers were given foods, both soft and brittle, sweet and sour, and drink which seemed to enter the pores of their skin as they quaffed it, and then the Guardian said: "We have caused a road to be made. Follow it and enter the next world. But we warn you, it is the most dangerous of all."

And they set off down the road that the Guardians had caused to be made and passed through the fourth gateway into a dreadful world—the world of Law.

t h r e e

Nothing shone in the grey-light sky, nothing moved, nothing marred the grey.

Nothing interrupted the bleak grey plain stretching on all sides of them, forever. There was no horizon. It was a bright, clean wasteland. But there was a sense about the air, a presence of something past, something which had gone but left a faint aura of its passing.

"What dangers could be here?" said Rackhir shuddering, "here where there is nothing?"

"The danger of the loneliest madness," Lamsar replied. Their voices were swallowed in the grey expanse.

"When the Earth was very young," Lamsar continued, his words trailing away across the wilderness, "things were like

this—but there were seas, there were seas. Here there is nothing.”

“You are wrong,” Rackhir said with a faint smile. “I have thought—here there is Law.”

“That is true—but what is Law without something to decide between? Here is Law—bereft of justice.”

They walked on, all about them an air of something intangible that had once been tangible. On they walked through this barren world of Absolute Law.

Eventually, Rackhir spied something. Something that flickered, faded, appeared again until, as they neared it, they saw that it was a man. His great head was noble, firm, and his body was massively built, but the face was twisted in a tortured frown and he did not see them as they approached him.

They stopped before him and Lamsar coughed to attract his attention. He turned that great head and regarded them abstractedly, the frown clearing at length, to be replaced by a calmer, thoughtful expression.

“Who are you?” asked Rackhir.

The man sighed. “Not yet,” he said, “not yet, it seems. More phantoms.”

“Are we the phantoms?” smiled Rackhir. “That seems to be more your own nature.” He watched as the man began slowly to fade again, his form less definite, melting. The body seemed to make a great heave, like a salmon attempting to leap a dam, then it was back again in a more solid form.

“I had thought myself rid of all that was superfluous, save my own obstinate shape,” the man said tiredly, “but here is something, back again. Is my reason failing—is my logic no longer what it was?”

“Do not fear,” said Rackhir, “we are material beings.”

“That is *what* I feared. For an eternity I have been stripping away the layers of unreality which obscure the truth. I have almost succeeded in the final act, and now you begin to creep back. My mind is not what it was, I think.”

“Perhaps you worry lest we do not exist?” Lamsar said slowly, with a clever smile.

“You know that is not so—you do not exist, just as I do not exist.” The frown returned, the features twisted, the body began, again, to fade, only to resume, once more, its earlier nature. The man sighed. “Even to reply to you is betraying

myself, but I suppose a little relaxation will serve to rest my powers and equip me for the final effort of will which will bring me to the ultimate truth—the truth of non-being.”

“But non-being involves non-thought, non-will, non-action,” Lamsar said. “Surely you would not submit yourself to such a fate?”

“There is no such thing as self. I am the only reasoning thing in creation—I am almost pure reason. A little more effort and I shall be what I desire to be—the one truth in this non-existent universe. That requires first ridding myself of anything extraneous around me—such as yourselves—and then making the final plunge into the only reality.”

“What is that?”

“The state of absolute nothingness where there is nothing to disturb the order of things because there *is* no order of things.”

“Scarcely a constructive ambition,” Rackhir said.

“Construction is a meaningless word—like all words, like all so-called existence. Everything means nothing—that is the only truth.”

“But what of this world? Barren as it is, it still has light and firm rock. You have not succeeded in reasoning that out of existence,” Lamsar said.

“That will cease when I cease,” the man said slowly, “just as you will cease to be. Then there can be nothing but nothing and Law will reign unchallenged.”

“But Law cannot reign—it will not exist either, according to your logic.”

“You are wrong—nothingness is the Law. Nothingness is the object of Law. Law is the way to its ultimate state, the state of non-being.”

“Well,” said Lamsar musingly, “then you had better tell us where we may find the next gate.”

“There is no gate.”

“If there were, where would we find it?” Rackhir said.

“If a gate existed, and it does not, it would have been inside the mountain, close to what was once called the Sea of Peace.”

“And where was that?” Rackhir asked, conscious, now of their terrible predicament. There were no landmarks, no sun, no stars—nothing by which they could determine direction.

“Close to the Mountain of Severity.”

“Which way do you go?” Lamsar enquired of the man.

“Out—beyond—to nowhere.”

"And where, if you succeed in your object, will we be consigned?"

"To some other nowhere. I cannot truthfully answer. But since you have never existed in reality, therefore you can go on to no non-reality. Only I am real—and I do not exist."

"We are getting nowhere," said Rackhir with a smirk which changed to a frown as he realised his predicament.

"It is only my mind which holds the non-reality at bay," the man said, "and I must concentrate or else it will all come flooding back and I shall have to start from the beginning again. In the beginning, there was everything—chaos. I *created* nothing."

With resignation, Rackhir strung his bow, fitted an arrow to the string and aimed at the frowning man.

"You wish for non-being?" he said.

"I have told you so." Rackhir's arrow pierced his heart, his body faded, became solid and slumped to the grass as mountains, forests and rivers appeared around them. It was still a peaceful, well-ordered world and Rackhir and Lamsar, as they strode on in search of the Mountain of Severity, savoured it. There seemed to be no animal life here and they talked, in puzzled terms, about the man they had been forced to kill, until, at length, they reached a great smooth pyramid which seemed, though it was of natural origin, to have been carved into this form. They walked around its base until they discovered an opening.

There could be no doubt that this was the Mountain of Severity, and a calm ocean lay some distance away. They went into the opening and emerged into a delicate landscape. They were now through the last gateway and in the Domain of the Grey Lords.

There were trees like stiffened spider-webs.

Here and there were blue pools, shallow, with shining water and graceful rocks balanced in them and around their shores. Above them and beyond them the light hills swept away towards a pastel yellow horizon which was tinted with red, orange and blue, deep blue.

They felt overlarge, clumsy, like crude, gross giants treading on the fine, short grass. They felt as if they were destroying the sanctity of the place.

Then they saw a girl come walking towards them.

She stopped as they came closer to her. She was dressed in loose black robes which flowed about her as if in a wind, but there was no wind. Her face was pale and pointed, her black eyes large and enigmatic. At her long throat was a jewel.

"Sorana," said Rackhir thickly, "you died."

"I disappeared," said she, "and this is where I came. I was told that you would come to this place and decided that I would meet you."

"But this is the Domain of the Grey Lords—and you serve Chaos."

"I do—but many are welcome at the Grey Lords' Court, whether they be of Law, Chaos or neither. Come, I will escort you there."

Bewildered, now, Rackhir let her lead the way across the strange terrain and Lamsar followed him.

Sorana and Rackhir had been lovers once, in Yeshpotoom-Kahlai, the Unholy Fortress where evil blossomed and was beautiful. Sorana, sorceress, adventuress, was without conscience but had had high regard for the Red Archer since he had come to Yeshpotoom-Kahlai one evening, covered in his own blood, survivor of a bizarre battle between the Knights of Tumbru and Loheb Bakra's brigand-engineers. Seven years ago, that had been, and he had heard her scream when the Blue Assassins had crept into the Unholy Fortress, pledged to murder evil-makers. Even then he had been in the process of hurriedly leaving Yeshpotoom-Kahlai and had considered it unwise to investigate what was obviously a death-scream. Now she was here—and if she was here, then it was for a strong reason and for her own convenience. On the other hand, it was in her interests to serve Chaos and he must be suspicious of her.

Ahead of them now they saw many great tents of shimmering grey which, in the light, seemed composed of all colours. People moved slowly among the tents and there was an air of leisure about the place.

"Here," Sorana said, smiling at him and taking his hand, "the Grey Lords hold impermanent court. They wander about their land and have few artifacts and only temporary houses which you see. They will make you welcome if you interest them."

"But will they help us?"

"You must ask them."

"You are pledged to Eequor of Chaos," Rackhir observed, "and must aid her against us, is that not so?"

"Here," she smiled, "is a truce. I can only inform Chaos of what I learn of your plans and, if the Grey Lords aid you, must tell them how, if I can find out."

"You are frank, Sorana."

"Here there are subtler hypocrisies—and the subtlest lie of all is the full truth," she said, as they entered the area of tall tents and made their way towards a certain one.

In a different dimension of the Earth, the huge horde careered across the grasslands of the North, screaming and singing behind the black-armoured horseman, their leader. Nearer and nearer they came to lonely Tanelorn, their motley weapons shining through the evening mists. Like a boiling tidal wave of insensate flesh, the mob drove on, hysterical with the hate for Tanelorn which Narjhan had placed in their thin hearts. Thieves, murderers, jackals, scavengers—a scrawny horde, but huge . . .

And in Tanelorn the warriors were grim-faced as their outriders and scouts flowed into the city with messages and estimates of the beggar army's strength.

Brut, in the silver armour of his rank, knew that two full days had passed since Rackhir had left for the Sighing Desert. Three more days and the city would be engulfed by Narjhan's mighty rabble—and they knew there was no chance of halting their advance. They might have left Tanelorn to its fate, but they would not. Even weak Uroch would not. For Tanelorn the Mysterious had given them all a secret power which each believed to be his only, a strength which filled them where before they had been hollow men. Selfishly, they stayed—for to leave Tanelorn to her fate would be to become hollow again, and that they all dreaded.

Brut was the leader and he prepared the defence of Tanelorn—a defence which might just have held against the beggar army—but not against it and Chaos. Brut shuddered when he thought that if Chaos had directed its full force against Tanelorn, they would be sobbing in Hell at that moment. A sliver of luck there was in the Unbreakable Law which governed both Law and Chaos and forbade them direct attack on men. They *had* to use human agents for their work.

Dust rose high above Tanelorn, sent flying by the hooves of the scouts' and messengers' horses. One came through the gate as Brut watched. He pulled his mount to a stop before the nobleman. He was the messenger from Kaarlak, by the Weeping Waste, one of the nearest major cities to Tanelorn.

The messenger gasped : " I asked Kaarlak for aid but, as we supposed, they had never heard of Tanelorn and suspected that I was an emissary from the beggar army sent to lead their few forces into a trap. I pleaded with the Senators, but they would do nothing."

" Was not Elric there—he knows Tanelorn ?"

" No, he was not there. There are rumours that he was killed in a great sea-battle between the Trader-princes of the Purple Ports and the Lormyrian Confederation, that the fleets met off Sorcerer's Isle near the Yellow Coasts and that the Trader-princes smashed the strength of Lormyr, slaying Elric in the process. There is another rumour which said that he was badly wounded and now lies dying among the ruins of Imrryr, his own city which he, himself, destroyed. But all I know is that Zarozinia, his princess, mourns him for dead and we'll get no help from Elric or from Kaarlak in Elric's name."

Brut was pale.

" What of Jadmar—will Jadmar send warriors ?" The messenger spoke urgently, for many had been sent to the nearer cities to solicit aid.

" I do not know," replied Brut, " and it does not matter now—for the beggar army is not three days march from Tanelorn and it would take two weeks for a Jadmarian force to reach us. We are doomed."

" And Rackhir ?"

" I have heard nothing and he has not returned. I have the feeling he will not return—Tanelorn is doomed."

Rackhir and Lamsar bowed before the three small men who sat in the tent, but one of them said impatiently : " Do not humble yourselves before us, friends—we who are humbler than any." So they straightened their backs and waited to be further addressed.

The Grey Lords assumed humility, but this, it seemed, was their greatest ostentation, for it was a pride that they had. Rackhir realised that he would need to use subtle flattery and was not sure that he could, for he was a warrior, not a courtier or a diplomat. Lamsar, too, realised the situation and he said:

"In our pride, Lords, we have come to learn the simpler truths which are only truths—the truths which you can teach us."

The speaker gave a self-depreciating smile and replied: "Truth is not for us to define, guest, we can but offer our incomplete thoughts. They might interest you or help you to find your own truths."

"Indeed, that is so," Rackhir said, not wholly sure with what he was agreeing, but judging it best to agree. "And we wondered if you had any suggestions on a matter which concerns us—the protection of our city, Tanelorn."

"We would not be so prideful as to interfere our own comments. We are not mighty intellects," the speaker replied blandly, "and we have no confidence in our own decisions, for who knows that they may be wrong and based on wrongly assessed information?"

"Indeed," said Lamsar, judging that he must flatter them with their own assumed humility, "and it is lucky for us, Lords, that we do not confuse pride with learning—for it is the quiet man who observes and says little who sees the most. Therefore, though we realise that you are not confident that your suggestions or help would be useful, nonetheless we, taking example from your own demeanour, humbly ask if you know of any way in which we might rescue Tanelorn?"

Rackhir had hardly been able to follow the complexities of Lamsar's seemingly unsophisticated argument, but he saw that the Grey Lords were pleased. Out of the corner of his eye he observed Sorana. She was smiling to herself and it seemed evident, by the characteristics of that smile, that they had behaved in the right way. Now Sorana was listening intently and Rackhir cursed to himself that the Lords of Chaos would know of everything and might, even if they did gain the Grey Lords' aid, still be able to anticipate and stop any action they took to save Tanelorn.

The speaker conferred in a liquid speech with his fellows and said finally: "Rarely do we have the privilege to entertain such brave and intelligent men. How may our insignificant minds be put to your advantage?"

Rackhir realised quite suddenly, and almost laughed, that the Grey Lords were not very clever after all. Their flattery had got them the help they required. He said:

"Narjhan of Chaos heads a huge army of human scum—a beggar army—and is sworn to tear down Tanelorn and kill her inhabitants. We need magical aid of some kind to combat one so powerful as Narjhan *and* defeat the beggars."

"There are beetles in Kaleef," said a Grey Lord who had not spoken before, "which emit a peculiar venom."

"Beetles, Lord?" said Rackhir.

"They are the size of mammoths," said the third Lord, "but can change their size—and change the size of their prey if it is too large for their gullets."

"As for that matter," the first speaker said, "there is a chimera which dwells in mountains South of here—it can change its shape and contains hate for Chaos since Chaos bred it and abandoned it with no real shape of its own."

"Then there are four brothers of Himerscahl who are endowed with sorcerous powers," said the second Lord, but the first interrupted him :

"Their magic is no good outside our own dimension," he said. "I had thought, however, of reviving the Blue Wizard."

"Too dangerous and, anyway, beyond our powers," said his companion.

They continued to debate for a while, and Rackhir and Lamsar said nothing, but waited.

Eventually the first speaker said :

"The Boatmen of Xerlerenes, we have decided, will probably be best equipped to aid you in defence of Tanelorn. You must go to the mountains of Xerlerenes and find their lake."

"A lake," said Lamsar, "in a range of mountains, I see."

"No," the Lord said, "their lake lies above the mountains. We will find someone to take you there. Perhaps they will aid you."

"You can guarantee nothing else?"

"Nothing—it is not our business to interfere. It is up to them to decide whether they will aid you or not."

"I see," said Rackhir, "thank you."

How much time had passed since he had left Tanelorn? How much time before Narjhan's beggar army reached the city? Or had it already done so?

Suddenly he thought of something, looked for Sorana, but she had left the tent.

"Where lies Xerlerenes?" Lamsar was asking.

"Not in our world," one of the Grey Lords replied, "come we will find you a guide."

Sorana spoke the necessary word which took her immediately into the blue half-world with which she was so familiar. There were no other colours in it, but many, many shades of blue. Here she waited until Eequor noticed her presence. In the timelessness, she could not tell how long she had waited.

The beggar horde came to an undisciplined and slow halt at a sign from its leader. A voice rang hollowly from the helm that was always closed.

"Tomorrow, we march against Tanelorn—the time we have anticipated is almost with us. Make camp now. Tomorrow shall Tanelorn be punished and the stones of her little houses will be dust on the wind."

The million beggars cackled their glee and wetted their scrawny lips. Not one of them asked why they had marched so far, and this was because of Narjhan's power.

In Tanelorn, Brut and Zas the One-handed discussed the nature of death in quiet, over-controlled tones. Both were filled with sadness, less for themselves than for Tanelorn, soon to perish. Outside, a pitiful army tried to place a cordon around the town but failed to fill the gaps between men, there were so few of them. Lights in the houses burned as if for the last time, and candles guttered moodily.

Sorana, sweating as she always did after such an episode, returned to the plane occupied by the Grey Lords and discovered that Rackhir, Lamsar and their guide were preparing to leave. Eequor had told her what to do—it was for her to contact Narjhan. The rest the Lords of Chaos would accomplish. She blew her ex-lover a kiss as he rode from the camp into the night. He grinned at her defiantly, but when his face was turned from her he frowned and they went in silence into the Valley of the Currents where they entered the world where lay the Mountains of Xerlerenes. Almost as soon as they arrived, danger presented itself.

Their guide, a wanderer called Timeras, pointed into the night sky which was spiked by the outlines of crags.

"This is a world where the air elementals are dominant," he said. "Look !"

Flowing downwards in an ominous sweep they saw a flight of owls, great eyes gleaming. Only as they came nearer did the men realise that these owls were huge, almost as large as a man. In the saddle Rackhir strung his bow. Timeras said :

"How could they have learned of our presence so soon?"

"Sorana," Rackhir said, busy with the bow, "she must have warned the Lords of Chaos and they have sent these dreadful birds." As the first one homed in, great claws grasping, great beak gaping, he shot it in its feathery throat and it shrieked and swept upwards. Many arrows fled from his humming bow-string to find a mark while Timeras drew his sword and slashed at them, ducking as they whistled downwards.

Lamsar watched the battle but took no part, seemed thoughtful at a time when action was desired of him.

He mused: "If the spirits of air are dominant in this world, then they will resent a stronger force of other elementals," and he racked his brain to remember a spell.

Rackhir had but two arrows left in his quiver by the time they had driven the owls off. The birds had not been used, evidently, to a prey which fought back and had put up a poor fight considering their superiority.

"We can expect more danger," said Rackhir somewhat shakily, "for the Lords of Chaos will use other means to try and stop us. How far to Xerlerenes?"

"Not far," said Timeras, "but it's a hard road."

They rode on, and Lamsar rode behind them, lost in his own thoughts.

Now they urged their horses up a steep mountain path and a chasm lay below them, dropping, dropping, dropping. Rackhir, who had no love for heights, kept as close to the mountainside as was possible. If he had had gods to whom he could pray, he would have prayed for their help then.

The huge fish came flying—or swimming—at them as they rounded a bend. They were semi-luminous, big as sharks but with enlarged fins with which they planed through the air like rays. They were quite evidently fish. Timeras drew his sword, but Rackhir had only two arrows left and it would have been useless against the air-fish to have shot them, for there were many of the fish.

But Lamsar laughed and spoke in a high-pitched, staccato speech. "*Crackhor—pishtasta salaflar!*"

Huge balls of flame materialised against the black sky—flaring balls of multicoloured fire which shaped themselves into strange, warlike forms and streamed towards the unnatural fish.

The flame-shapes seared into the big fish and they shrieked, struck at the fire-balls, burned, and fell flaming down the deep gorge.

"Fire elementals !" Rackhir exclaimed.

"The spirits of the air fear such beings," Lamsar said calmly.

The flame-beings accompanied them the rest of the way to Xerlerenes and were with them when dawn came, having frightened away many other dangers which the Lords of Chaos had evidently sent against them.

They saw the boats of Xerlerenes in the dawn, at anchor on a calm sky, fluffy clouds playing around their slender keels, their huge sails furled.

"The boatmen live aboard their vessels," Timeras said, "for it is only their ships which deny the laws of nature, not they."

Timeras cupped his hands about his mouth and called through the still mountain air : "Boatmen of Xerlerenes, freemen of the air, guests come with a request for aid !"

A black and beared face appeared over the side of one of the red-gold vessels. The man shielded his eyes against the rising sun and stared down at them. Then he disappeared again.

At length a ladder of slim thongs came snaking down to where they sat their horses on the tops of the mountains. Timeras grasped it, tested it and began to climb. Rackhir reached out and steadied the ladder for him. It seemed too thin to support a man but when he had it in his hands he knew that it was the strongest he had ever known.

Lamsar grumbled as Rackhir signalled for him to climb, but he did so and quite nimbly. Rackhir was the last, following his companions, climbing up through the sky high above the crags, towards the ship that sailed on the air.

The fleet comprised some twenty or thirty ships and Rackhir felt that with these to aid him, there was a good chance to rescue Tanelorn—if Tanelorn survived. Narjhan would, anyway, be aware of the nature of the aid he sought.

Starved dogs barked the morning in and the beggar horde, waking from where they had sprawled on the ground, saw Narjhan already mounted, but talking to a newcomer, a girl in black robes that moved as if in a wind—but there was no wind. There was a jewel at her long throat.

When he had finished conversing with the newcomer, Narjhan ordered a horse be brought for her and she rode

slightly behind him when the beggar army moved on—the last stage of their hateful journey to Tanelorn.

When they saw lovely Tanelorn and how it was so poorly guarded, the beggars laughed, but Narjhan and his new companion looked up into the sky.

"There may be time," said the hollow voice, and gave the order to attack.

Howling, the beggars broke into a run towards Tanelorn. The attack had started.

Brut rose in his saddle and there were tears flowing down his face and glistening in his beard. His huge war-axe was in one gauntleted hand and the other held a spiked mace across the saddle before him.

Zas the One-handed gripped the long and heavy broadsword with its pommel of a rampant golden lion pointing downwards. This blade had won him a crown in Andlermagne, but he doubted whether it would successfully defend his peace in Tanelorn. Beside him stood Uroch of Nieva, pale-faced but angry as he watched the ragged horde's implacable approach.

Then, yelling, the beggars met with the warriors of Tanelorn and, although greatly outnumbered, the warriors fought desperately for they were defending more than life or love—they were defending that which had told them of a reason for living.

Narjhan sat his horse aside from the battle, Sorana next to him, for Narjhan could take no active part in the battle, could only watch and, if necessary, use magic to aid his human pawns or defend his person.

The warriors of Tanelorn, incredibly, held back the roaring beggar horde, their weapons drenched with blood, rising and falling in that sea of moving flesh, flashing in the light of the red dawn.

Sweat now mingled with the salt tears in Brut's bristling beard and with agility he leapt clear of his black horse as the screaming beast was cut from under him. The noble war-cry of his forefathers sang on his breath and, although in his shame he had no business to use it, he let it roar from him as he slashed about him with biting war-axe and rending mace. But he fought hopelessly for Rackhir had not come and Tanelorn was soon to die. His one fierce consolation was that he would die with the city, his blood mingling with its ashes.

Zas, also, acquitted himself very well before he died of a smashed skull. His old body twitched as trampling feet stumbled over it as the beggars made for Uroch of Nieva. The gold-pommel sword was still gripped in his single hand and his soul was fleeing for Limbo as Uroch, too, was slain fighting.

Then the Ships of Xerlerenes suddenly materialised in the sky and Brut, looking upward for an instant, knew that Rackhir had come at last—though it might be too late.

Narjhan, also, saw the Ships and was prepared for them.

They skimmed through the sky, the fire elementals which Lamsar had summoned, flying with them. The spirits of air and flame had been called to rescue weakening Tanelorn . . .

The Boatmen prepared their weapons and made themselves ready for war. Their black faces had a concentrated look and they grinned in their bushy beards. War-harness clothed them and they bristled with weapons—long, barbed tridents, nets of steel mesh, curved swords, long harpoons. Rackhir stood in the prow of the leading ship, his quiver packed with slim arrows loaned him by the Boatmen. Below him he saw Tanelorn and was relieved that the city still stood.

He could see the milling warriors below, but it was hard to tell, from the air, which were friends and which were foes. Lamsar called to the frisking fire elementals, instructing them. Timeras grinned and held his sword ready as the ships rocked on the wind and dropped lower.

Now Rackhir observed Narjhan with Sorana beside him.

"The bitch has warned him—he is ready for us," Rackhir said, wetting his lips and drawing an arrow from his quiver.

Down the Ships of Xerlerenes dropped, coursing downwards on the currents of air, their golden sails billowing, the warrior crews straining over the side and keen for battle.

Then Narjhan summoned the *Kyrenee*.

Huge as a storm-cloud, black as its native Hell, the *Kyrenee* grew from the surrounding air and moved its shapeless bulk forward towards the Ships of Xerlerenes, sending out flowing tendrils of poison towards them. Boatmen groaned as the coils curled around their naked bodies and crushed them.

Lamsar called urgently to his fire elementals and they rose again from where they had been devouring beggars, came together in one great blossoming of flame which moved to do battle with the *Kyrenee*.

The two masses met and there was an explosion which blinded the Red Archer with multi-coloured light and sent the Ships rocking and shaking so that several capsized and sent their crews hurtling downwards to death.

Blotches of flame flew everywhere and patches of poison blackness from the body of the *Kyrenee* were flung about, slaying those they touched before disappearing.

There was a terrible stink in the air—a smell of burning, a smell of outraged elements which had never been meant to meet.

The *Kyrenee* died, lashing about and wailing, while the flame elementals, dying or returning to their own sphere, faded and vanished. The remaining bulk of the great *Kyrenee* billowed slowly down to the earth where it fell upon the scrabbling beggars and killed them, leaving nothing but a wet patch on the ground for yards around, a patch glistening with the bones of beggars.

Now Rackhir cried: "Quickly—finish the fight before Narjhan summons more horrors!"

And the boats sailed downwards while the Boatmen cast their steel nets, pulling large catches of beggars aboard their Ships and finishing the wriggling starvings with their tridents or spears.

Rackhir shot arrow after arrow and had the satisfaction of seeing each one take a beggar just where he had aimed it. The remaining warriors of Tanelorn, led by Brut who was covered in sticky blood but grinning in his victory, charged towards the unnerved beggars.

Narjhan stood his ground, while the beggars, fleeing, streamed past him and the girl. Sorana seemed frightened, looked up and her eyes met Rackhir's. The Red Archer aimed an arrow at her, thought better of it and shot instead at Narjhan. The arrow went into the black armour but had no effect upon the Lord of Chaos.

Then the Boatmen of Xerlerenes flung down their largest net from the vessel in which Rackhir sailed and they caught Lord Narjhan in its coils and caught Sorana, too.

Shouting their exhilaration, they pulled the struggling bodies aboard and Rackhir ran forward to inspect their catch. Sorana had received a scratch across her face from the net's wire, but the body of Narjhan lay still and dreadful in the mesh.

Rackhir grabbed an axe from a Boatman and knocked back the helm, his foot upon the chest.

"Yield, Narjhan of Chaos !" he cried in mindless merriment. He was near hysterical with victory, for this was the first time a mortal had ever bested a Lord of Chaos.

But the armour was empty, if it had ever been occupied by flesh, and Narjhan was gone.

Calm settled aboard the Ships of Xerlerenes and over the city of Tanelorn. The remnants of the warriors had gathered in the city's square and were cheering their victory.

Friagho, the Captain of Xerlerenes, came up to Rackhir and shrugged. "We did not get the catch we came for—but these will do. Thanks for the fishing, friend."

Rackhir smiled and gripped Friagho's black shoulder. "Thanks for the aid—you have done us all a great service."

Friagho shrugged again and turned back to his nets, his trident poised. Suddenly Rackhir shouted : "No, Friagho—let that one be. Let me have the contents of that net."

Sorana, the contents to which he'd referred, looked anxious as if she had rather been transfixed on the prongs of Friagho's trident. Friagho said : "Very well, Red Archer—there are plenty more people on the land," pulled at the net to release her.

She stood up shakily, looking at Rackhir apprehensively.

Rackhir smiled quite softly and said : "Come here, Sorana." She went to him and stood staring up at his bony hawk's face, her eyes wide. With a laugh he picked her up and flung her over his shoulder.

"Tanelorn is safe !" he shouted. "Come, Sorana—you shall learn to love its peace with me !" And he began to clamber down the trailing ladders that the Boatmen had dropped over the side.

—Michael Moorcock

Sherwell wasn't sure where the dream ended and reality began, or, in fact, which was which. All he felt reasonably sure about was the fact that he could read the future.

DEAD END

BY PHILIP E. HIGH

Sherwell lay in the long grass and watched the smoke rise from the tip of his cigarette in the warm summer air. Sherwell had been thinking hard but now he had almost given up, his thoughts had grown tired of revolving in circles and his brain felt numb. He was an intelligent man but the effort of arranging conflicting and wholly paradoxical data into some sort of order had finally defeated him. Now, apart from a persistent feeling of terror, he was almost content to smoke and watch the pale blue of the afternoon sky.

Sherwell was tall, heavy jawed, with a naturally dark skin made mahogany-coloured by a love for the open air. By profession he was an industrial chemist but it was not chemistry but life worrying him now.

A less balanced man might have gone insane but, fortunately, Sherwell was too stable even for mild neurosis. Again, he was well muscled and physically strong despite a great deal of suffering. There was a metal plate in his skull and certain of his internal organs were supported by fine metallic wires. All were legacies of a particularly vicious rear-guard action in Korea. Nonetheless, until a year ago, he had thought he had emerged from the ordeal with his faculties unimpaired.

What did one do when one suddenly awakened to the fact that, under certain circumstances, one could read the future? God, it was not even an exciting or esoteric experience but as

mundane and as factual as simple arithmetic or elementary chemistry. One had only to think along given lines to deduce a possible answer—anyone could do it. Anyone could say that if that man continues in the same direction he will undoubtedly fall down the hole some workmen have dug in the middle of the path. 'Anyone' however, might be wrong; the man might look up, someone might warn him or he might change his mind and walk in a different direction.

When Sherwell did it, however, there was no doubt of the outcome—the man would trip over the protective barrier and fall slap into the hole.

Sherwell knew because when he thought it, it always happened. When Sherwell added two and two, irrespective of 'mights' 'ifs' or imponderables, it always happened. No amount of jiggery pokery and the rearrangement of figures would ever alter his first total, he had proved that for himself too often.

There were, of course, numerous totals too far in the future to be checked but he had no doubt of their accuracy.

He had known what was going to happen to young Collins as he had started his motor bike at the entrance to the plant. He had known that before he had gone a mile.

He had tried to shout a warning from an upper window but it had been too late.

He had not been surprised to hear, forty minutes later, that Collins had skidded and gone under a truck. He had *known* it was going to happen, not because he had 'seen' it in some soul-shaking vision but because he had *reasoned* it out. Young Collins had been late for a date, he always drove too fast, it had been raining and it was slippery at Kelson's Corner where the trucks turned in for the new power station. It had been the simple addition of known facts which, as usual proved correct.

There had been others, too many others, and, after a year of precise checking, a preponderance of confirmation which no amount of 'coincidence-thinking' could undermine.

Strangely the faculty did not apply to himself save in one instance. One day, somewhere, he was going to meet Lorayne. He knew that Lorayne was a girl and that he wanted desperately to meet her but, beyond that, nothing.

There had been Marla, for example, he and Marla had once been very close and on the verge of marriage. Marla had been—still was—tiny, vivacious and laughing but his faculty had

ended that. He'd *known* that in ten years, by the normal processes of life, Marla would become piggy-eyed, gross and neurotic. By then he'd have had enough experience of his faculty to get out from under before talk turned to preachers and ceremonies. He still felt a rat about it but the future would have held no happiness for either of them.

It had been much the same with Margot who was slender, wide-eyed and virginal. In six years she would be bright, brassy and aggressively amoral with a string of lovers as long as his arm.

Sherwell had considered a psychiatrist. Unfortunately, before the interviews had really begun, casual observation and casual conclusion led to the inevitable.

Sherwell could still see the headline in his mind's eye :—

FAMOUS PSYCHIATRIST DIES AT WORLD
CONFERENCE

There had been one more contact which Sherwell had hastily broken off himself. Jansen had been a personal friend but Jansen had asked him to prove his faculty.

Sherwell had no control over the line his faculty might take and, seeing the end, knowing that warnings were useless, he had failed to arrive for the next appointment because on that day . . .

'I tried to warn him,' Sherwell told himself, 'but he laughed at me.'

Leo Jansen, aged eighteen, the psychiatrist's only son, was found at the foot of a cliff. He'd been on a camping holiday, left his tent for some reason at night and presumably lost his sense of direction in the darkness.

Sherwell had known it was going to happen a week before the actual fatality.

He ground out his cigarette on a small stone he found in the grass and sighed ; dully he was aware of the heavy Luger in his right hand pocket. He had not come out on the moor with intentions of suicide but to conduct an experiment. Could he, in some way, determine his own faculty in respect of something living. Could he look at a rabbit, a bird, a hare and see himself kill it. If he could then he might be able to relate the incident back to himself and thereby establish a reference point. He had to get this thing clear in relation to himself rather than other people then, perhaps, he might be able to control it.

Less scrupulous men would have turned such a gift into money but Sherwell had instinctively pulled back from something which might involve him personally. At present he was an observer ; active participation might, he felt, place him in a position where he was doomed forever.

Strangely and terribly he had always been unable to warn people. Jansen had laughed at him, he'd shouted a warning to young Collins too late, always something intervened or made his efforts useless.

Sherwell rose slowly, shook himself and stared unseeingly at the distant mountains. A pity he hadn't brought a shot-gun but surely he could get close enough to something, if only a sparrow or a pigeon, to risk a shot. A short walk, perhaps, might bring him to some likely target before the sun set.

The rabbit sat on a slight rise some thirty yards ahead and nibbled at the grass. Sherwell moved forward ; patrols in Korea had taught him to move silently but he was sweating before he was close enough to risk a shot with the Luger.

The rabbit had its back to him, he was safely down-wind but Sherwell's faculty refused to operate. Did he have to find some *reasoning* intelligence before—no, that dog running across the road near his home, he'd known what was going to happen before the bus came round the bend.

He sighted carefully and pulled the trigger. The brief slapping report of the weapon was quickly lost in the open moorland and then the rabbit was leaping high in the air and rolling over.

It hadn't worked. Sherwell put the weapon back in his pocket and felt an overwhelming despair. It hadn't worked and, perhaps, it had been insane to try. If his conscious mind *knew* he was going to kill the rabbit what point was there in his faculty advising him of the fact ?

'On the other hand,' he thought, bitterly. 'I might have missed.'

Sherwell hated killing for the sake of killing. He crossed to the still body and bent down beside it. A damn shame, really, the poor little . . .

The thoughts seemed to freeze in his mind and coagulate into a kind of heavy numbness. The bullet had split the animal's side leaving a jagged opening. Inside the opening was a shattered mechanism, tiny shards of silver metal, minute cogs and springs had spilled into the grass. Buried in the fur,

behind the animal's neck but clearly visible was a small metal plate. On it was printed : NATURO-BOTICS INCORPORATED.

Sherwell rose. He was still numb but conscious of a frantic and mounting tension. For the first time he began to question both his vision and his sanity. Was this some impossible dream, perhaps drug-induced ? Had he met with an accident and could all this be a fantasy induced by morphia or some other pain-killing compound ? Perhaps, very soon now, he would wake in a bright hospital bed with a starched and forbidding nurse taking his pulse. Then, of course, all this would be explained. It would be a dream which, if remembered, he would re-live with amusement and disbelief.

Almost calm, he bent down to pluck a long blade of grass. He was better now, contemplatively assured of his dream, he wanted to chew his fantasy grass happily and with content.

It wasn't grass. It refused to be pulled up or broken off, it stretched like rubber and jerked back like a living plastic.

Sherwell extracted a cigarette from his case and held the flame of his lighter unsteadily to its tip. He was on the verge of cracking completely but his genius for rationalisation saved him from final collapse.

There were not, as far as he knew, such inventions as mechanical rabbits or plastic grass, yet there was the rabbit and here was the grass. Since such anomalies could not exist in a sane world, the fault must lie somewhere within himself. He was, therefore, the victim of an accident or drug-induced dream, a dream which had all the *appearances* of reality. He had often spoken with men whose experiences under anaesthetics or drugs had been those of a dream world which, at the time, had seemed wholly *real*.

Perhaps he was at a dentist's under 'gas,' the victim of a road accident, undergoing an operation, who knew ? The point was that this period of fantasy had probably begun with the first manifestations of his alleged faculty, everyone knew that in dreams, time was meaningless.

If in the sane world, his body, brain and nerves were being subjected to something inductive, *this* and *this* was a dream-fantasy. If he tried to oppose or reject the evidence of his over-stimulated senses and treat this world as true reality he would undoubtedly crack-up fast. It was not pleasant to go insane even in a dream and who knew what the repercussions might

be when he regained consciousness? The only rational thing, therefore, was to concede that this was fantasy and ride with it.

Sherwell exhaled smoke and tried to grin to himself. All right, fantasy, lead on.

There had been a pathway leading down from the high moorland to the secondary road four miles away but now there was no path.

Sherwell shrugged and headed in the general direction of where the path had been—had that granite outcropping been quite so small?

A mile back and rounding a shoulder of rock he came face to face with a man. The man sat on a large round stone as if waiting but his eyes were blank and expressionless.

"I've been waiting for you, Sherwell," said the man.

"You have?" The chemist stared at him, vaguely ill at ease. Even for a dream the man seemed strangely unnatural. He wore a tight, black, one-piece suit without buttons, zips, or visible pockets. On his head was a little, tight skull cap but below it no hair was visible, as if the scalp had been completely shaved. When he spoke his eyes remained glassy and without expression.

"I have." The man's voice was flat, expressionless, as if he were the instrument of the voice rather than its manipulator. "You may, if you wish, call me Smith. That is not my name but it is a point of reference in a panorama which may threaten your sanity. Not that every allowance has not been made—"

He paused, as if waiting for another tape recording to be inserted in his mind and then continued: "You have a long journey and Mother will not be happy about you. Remember, you must not answer Mother or she will be able to classify you and Mother will love you to death. If Mother cannot classify you, you may pass through her era in safety—do I make myself plain?"

"As far as I am concerned," said Sherwell, bitterly, "every word you've spoken is a complete riddle."

The man called Smith stirred slightly and his features twitched as if the muscles were the subject of some remote and painful manipulation. "Mother is an era, a period of time, she is also a regime just as political factions are eras and regimes. Mother lived ten thousand years. Don't answer her, Sherwell.

If you answer her she will recognise you and, if she recognises you, she will either love you to death or destroy you as a danger to her charges—”

The man stopped as if a recording tape had snapped, gurgling sounds came from his throat and his eyes slowly lost their glassy blankness.

“Who—you?” His face was now normal but terrified and he looked wildly about him. “How here?” His English was only just understandable and curiously lilting. “How, or who, project I? How get? Forbidden here it is—”

“Now, look,” Sherwell took a step forward.

“Mother, protect!” Smith cringed back, his face colourless with terror. “I shall be cliniced, you are not one of Mother’s—” He fumbled frantically with something at his waist.

Sherwell felt the muscles of his face stiffen painfully because Smith didn’t turn and run nor did he disappear, he *receded*. It was like a television programme switched off in the middle of the picture. Smith grew smaller, rushed backwards, shrank to a tiny pin-point of light in the distance and vanished completely.

Sherwell said: “My God!” under his breath and felt his skin prickle with sweat. ‘This is a dream,’ he told himself, desperately. ‘Things like this happen in dreams.’ Grimly and with only partial success he fought down the insistent thought that whatever was happening to him didn’t *feel* like a dream.

Forcing himself to calmness he walked on. There was still no path, the peaks of the familiar mountains in the distance seemed no longer so tall or so jagged and one, the Witches Tooth, seemed to have vanished completely.

He climbed a small rise, knowing that beyond should be the town, the bay, the sloping grasslands, the familiar pattern of highways, factories and cultivated fields—only there wasn’t.

When he reached the top a vast and hideous city stretched away beyond the horizon. It was a city such as he had never dreamed nor could conceive of any man imagining. The buildings were so huge that the skyscrapers of New York would have looked as toys beside them. Each building was uniform, each was an unreflecting black and each was ornate and massive like huge and unlikely cinema organs. They stretched away in even rows as far as he could see.

Strangely, the city gave an impression of enormous and brooding power as if the black, ornate buildings were massive silently operating machines.

Looking closer he saw long rows of black motes speeding in regulated lines above the buildings. Air traffic? Yet some of the motes looked too small to carry men.

He never remembered afterwards walking the odd four miles to the first building. Perhaps he had a black-out or was carried by some unknown force, but suddenly he was standing in the centre of a huge and silent street. The surface of the street moved beneath his feet carrying him swiftly and silently between the vast and windowless buildings.

Nowhere could he see people, the constant lines of air traffic rushing silently above him was the only sign of life or movement. Life? Some of the silently rushing vehicles were no bigger than a man's clenched fist.

It was then he noticed the stars. They came sliding down from the sky like a swarm of tiny suns and began to circle about him like bright and angry bees.

"Wahya?"

"Go'est?"

They were speaking to him, obviously asking him questions but he could not understand them.

Slowly the sounds seemed to lengthen into lilting, curiously feminine and understandable words.

"Who are you?"

"Where are you going?"

"Identify yourself."

"What is your number?"

He opened his mouth to reply and suddenly remembered the man called Smith. "*Do not answer Mother.*"

Could these bright circling things be something controlled by Mother—whatever Mother was? Determinedly he set his lips and did not reply.

Sherwell realised dully but without particular relief that he was well past the stage of breakdown, he was numb and almost prepared to accept events as *real*. Dream or no dream, he was living in it, wasn't he? Let events move in front of him, let the panorama of impossibility unroll, he was a genuine observer and only a part participant.

"Are you unwell?" asked the bright shining bees.

"Come to the clinic."

"Let Mother protect you."

"Do you not know it is dangerous to be exposed to the sun. Why else should I have shielded you all from its light?"

"What is your identity number?"

"If I cannot classify, I cannot help."

Sherwell shrugged and shook his head. He knew, even in this world of fantasy that Smith's warning had been correct, these softly speaking voices came from Mother.

Strangely, he found himself rationalising the circling stars which were, no doubt, some form of remotely controlled vocal instruments. As for 'Mother,' she was all too clearly some sort of authoritarian government with, possibly, a matriarchal basis. He was wrong, but he did not discover the fact until much later.

He was still being carried silently forward but he was becoming aware that the buildings were becoming shabby with spreading patches of discolouration.

The sun too, seemed smaller but brighter yet it still hung in the same place in the afternoon sky. 'That's the trouble with fantasy,' he thought. 'That's what makes it fantasy, the subtle, impossible blending of inconsistency with fact.'

Again he was aware of a curious impression of change. The circling lights were less brilliant, one had become dull red and two were flickering uncertainly. The voices, too, seemed scratchy and uneven like recorded voices which had been played back too often.

"Answer, identify yourself."

"What is your relationship to the sub-continuum?"

Then, peering ahead up the seemingly endless street, for the first time he saw a man.

The man ran out of one of the buildings and on to the moving way and crouched there as if afraid.

He was too far away to distinguish his features but Sherwell saw him suddenly raise his arm in a curiously familiar movement.

There was a single bright flash and above, in one of the air lanes, a black blob of a vehicle puffed flame, wobbled uncertainly and fell out of line. It vanished, trailing smoke and falling rapidly, behind one of the nearer buildings. The man turned and ran back out of sight.

In the next ten minutes Sherwell saw the same incident repeated with variations several times. Once, however, something swooped from the sky and the crouching man vanished in a puff of vapour.

There was now no doubt in Sherwell's mind that the city was deteriorating rapidly. There were long gaps in the streams of air traffic passing above him and the moving way beneath his feet was becoming jerky and uncertain.

One of the circling lights, too, had become dim and was obviously maintaining its position with an effort. Finally it fell, there was a tinkling sound and a plume of sparks. It rose again twice like a crippled bird then fell back spinning. Sherwell caught a brief glimpse of a tiny circular device like a blackened golf ball and then it crumpled to dust.

He realised that more and more people were crowding the streets, many of them armed with strange-looking weapons but already the black air-vehicles were falling wearily from the sky of their own accord.

The moving way jerked, shivered, jerked again and finally stopped.

Sherwell walked forward. Somehow it seemed to be the end of an age yet he had the curious impression that he was still being carried forward.

People were now crowding the streets, pushing past him unseeingly with excited urgent faces, often pausing to stare upwards. Now and again a single air vehicle wobbled uncertainly across the sky but there was no doubt in Sherwell's mind that the city was dying.

Loudly but remotely he heard a clamour of voices and then a tremendous shout : " Mother is dead ! Mother is dead ! "

He was unable to make up his mind whether it was a lamentation or a cheer but he thought it was a cheer.

Again Sherwell experienced one of those curious black-outs which had carried him from the moorland to the city. One minute he was walking along the already buckling moving way, the next he was knee deep in long grass.

The late afternoon sun now looked bigger, redder and was not quite so warm. On either side the immense buildings had become cracked and hollow shells or piles of rubble overgrown with weeds.

There were no people ; willowy and unfamiliar trees rose here and there between the buildings, their pastel silvery leaves rustling metallically in a light, cool breeze.

Something swooped from one building to the next. It could have been a bird but its wings were glittering and translucent

and the body shimmered and reflected the light like an exquisitely carved crystal.

"Hello, Sherwell." The man stepped suddenly from behind a pile of rubble and fell into step at his side. "The name is Roberts, not that names matter any more but a name has been advised as a reference point."

Sherwell stared at him. Roberts was extraordinarily masculine but he wore his long platinum-blond hair tied into a sort of pony-tail. His eyes were strangely triangular and glittered slightly as if flecked with crystals. Physically he was immensely tall, he was also completely naked.

"I am sorry," said Roberts. "There is no time for you to ask questions, only time to remark and observe." He paused slightly and continued. "Has it ever occurred to you how unfair life is? The afflicted genius and the healthy moron, the frail saint and the robust sinner? When you put life and death together the situation seems even worse, the good die often and the bad seem to live on, everything in creation seems a great and disgraceful injustice.

"Take young Collins as an example. He was young, handsome, friendly, decent and with all the drive for a brilliant future."

Roberts paused again. "In later life, however, Collins' genius in organic chemistry would have resulted in the creation of an artificial virus which would have completely wiped out humanity." The man called Roberts sighed. "Because of this young Collins had to die, it seems unfair but there was no other way . . ."

"Now look!" Sherwell felt a deep and sudden anger. "Any damn fool can presume, any idiot can create a glib philosophy and arrange facts to fit it. In the first place—" He stopped. There was no one beside him and he was walking through the long grass alone.

He saw the city rise ahead of him slowly, like the growth of plants revealed in a nature film. It was as different, yet as alien as the first. The buildings were crystal stems, rising in groups yet jutting out at angles like strange geometric plants.

There seemed to be no vehicular traffic but he could just discern people apparently dressed in coloured robes walking quietly about the city.

Presently he came to a flat white stone around which the grass had been cleared *and the stone spoke to him!*

There was no lettering on the stone, no inscription which he might have translated yet he knew the stone spoke.

"Transfer plate 0/7," said the stone, and : "Sherwell, your transfer number is 83."

'A matter transmitter with embedded path-print,' thought Sherwell, dully and had no idea how he knew.

He stepped on the stone, thought : 'number 83' and found himself instantly in a wide airy room.

A dark haired man sat in a huge comfortable chair facing him, a man in an orange coloured robe with a long sad face and slender expressive hands.

"Welcome to our city," said the man. Then, gently. "Do sit down, Sherwell, we've been expecting you."

Sherwell sat. A chair, similar to the man's had appeared at his side from nowhere with a slight crackling sound.

"My name is Trahl," said the man. "Not that names are important now as you have already heard, but it will serve until you grasp the principles of tele-identities. However—" he smiled, "it has been a long journey and there is much to explain. We'll take it easily, step by step, and you may ask questions afterwards."

He leaned forward and Sherwell realised he was completely bald and not dark haired as he had at first supposed. The colouring which resembled hair was a burnished blackness as if the scalp had been shaved and carefully shined with black shoe-polish. Unconsciously he put his hand to his own head and was horrified to find it slippery and hairless.

"Sorry," said the man called Trahl, apologetically. "We've had to do a great deal of adjustment and psycho-re-education on the journey otherwise our civilisation would have been beyond you. Oh, and yes, on the arm of your chair you will find a mirror, look in it."

Sherwell found, looked, and was considerably shaken. His face was thinner, more sensitive and the colour of his eyes had changed to silver. His head was a hairless and polished black.

"Look at me and speak."

"I don't see . . ." began Sherwell and stopped. His lips were not moving.

"It seemed like speech, didn't it?" The man was still very gentle and understanding. "The truth is, however, that you are projecting and, of course, receiving a mental image rather than a verbal one, you're a telepath now. Again, don't let the

state of your scalp worry you—we gave up eating a long time ago—your scalp is a receptor, a mouth if you prefer it, which absorbs the raw energy, cosmic or solar, by which you live. It's part evolutionary and part genetic manipulation which began a long time ago." He paused, folding his hands. "Incidentally, have you any idea how far you've travelled?"

Sherwell shrugged and frowned. "Ten—twenty miles?"

"Er—yes, but I was not referring to distance but to time. In distance you travelled seven and a half miles but in time you've travelled nearly a million years. You're not the first, of course, the records of all ages contain reports of people who vanished from their time point and were never seen again."

"This is *reality*—not an illusion?" Sherwell's mouth felt dry.

"This is reality."

Sherwell shook himself. "Good God—*why*?"

Trahl spread his slender hands. "We needed you here in this age more than you were needed in your own. Your particular genetic structure is no longer available in this age and will help revitalise the race. Again, a series of minor but incredibly important events placed you in a position of power which might have destroyed our entire operation. By an unlikely but inescapable sequence of events you became a receptor for our instruments. You had a metal plate in your skull, a curious arrangement of supporting wires inside you and these, coupled with the solar radiations of the period, enable you to 'tune in' and reason out the immediate future for yourself. We had to pull you out in a hurry before you destroyed a whole sequence of events."

He paused. "I must apologise for a frightening journey, we advised you where possible, but Mother's age was a very tricky period, an enormous amount of static floods that period and we dare not pull you through it too fast."

"Are you trying to tell me that you can influence the past?" Sherwell could feel anger mounting inside him.

"But, of course—how else could we have guided you from it?"

"But the wars, the injustices, the cruelties." Sherwell felt as if he were about to spring. "You're responsible for them."

"We work for the ultimate not the immediate, if we observe trends for good emerging from evil, it is our duty only to direct them. Resentful as you may understandably feel, remember,

please, if we did not manipulate the past there would be no future, at least not for man. You have been told about young Collins, now take Mother as another example. Mother came into being in an age when men despaired of themselves. They wanted security, freedom from fear, an impersonal but benevolent ruler who was beyond corruption. They wanted someone to handle, maintain and operate their nerve-wracking civilisation without fear or favour, so they built a gigantic and reasoning machine to do the job for them.

"Unfortunately the designers, fearing a mechanical autocracy, erred on the benevolent side. Mother ran and maintained their civilisation for ten thousand years but she almost destroyed them in the process. She shut them away in great uniform prisons to protect them from danger and she regulated their individual lives beyond endurance. We permitted her regime as the alternatives in the probability-computers were worse but we had to undermine it in the end and then, as you may have guessed, the people revolted."

Trahl rose. "Don't be alarmed, Sherwell, as your education progresses you will see the need for time-manipulation."

"But surely the whole conception is a paradox."

"Indeed it is, even our scientists refer to the time-continuum-paradox. We can reach into the past and pull a man into the present but we cannot reverse the process nor can we manipulate the future. Despite these difficulties, however, our scientists have considerable skill in this field." He smiled suddenly. "I am being a poor host, you have had a long and tiring journey—and, please, Sherwell, don't look so worried. This is a gracious and gentle age and I feel sure you will be happy here. Oh, and yes, there is someone waiting for you whose time period is near to your own. We have, I confess, taken the liberty of educating both of you for this particular union but don't let that disturb you, it only ensures your lasting happiness together." Trahl smiled again. "Her name is Lorayne . . ."

She was tiny, small boned, with a delicacy and sensitivity of feature which instantly appealed to him. Almost instantly their thoughts flowed together as if they had known and understood each other for centuries.

"I have been waiting for you so long."

"I, too." He took her hands. "And you are glad now that I have come?"

"So very glad." She held his hand to her cheek and then her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "At least we have twenty years together."

"Yes." He sensed her sadness but could not explain it. "Apparently they cannot see the future but we can—we shall be happy."

"Did they tell you that?" She looked at him strangely and sadly. "It's not quite true. It's like the man walking towards the hole in the path, they can predict his progress to reasonable limits."

He sighed. "Must they? Surely there are limits to this thing? From what I have been able to pick up, this age has turned time-manipulation into a major industry, everyone seems to be directly or indirectly engaged on the damn project."

She shook her head slowly. "It's not only here, not only on this planet—it spans a galaxy, ten thousand habitable worlds, the entire and gigantic race of man."

He exploded. "Good God, why? Isn't this age perfect enough, do they have to keep tinkering and fooling around until it's well nigh exquisite?"

She looked up at him, her face paling. "Didn't they tell you—oh, how cruel." She clung to him.

"What is it darling, what is it?" He held her close.

She shook her head. "It's nothing really, their kindness is calculated, not spontaneous as in your age and mine. Perhaps, to them, this was the best way—that—that I should tell you."

"I don't quite understand darling." He was filled with a growing alarm. "What is it, what is troubling you?"

She hid her face from him but he knew she was crying. "Darling, this industry as you call it, this time manipulation, it's not to help this age. It's a survival measure. They have to comb the past fact by fact, probability by probability. Every speck of dust in the dawn wind must be tracked and plotted to its destination. Every flutter of every leaf that ever grew must be checked against ten million probabilities. They're searching for a fault, some error in calculation, some flaw in the continuum."

"But why, is it that desperate?"

"More than desperate dear, far more than desperate." Her shoulders shook. "I told you we had twenty years, let's make the most of them. After that is darkness, science can see nothing, after that—there is no future."

Philip E. High

Clayton didn't want the traditional three wishes—only one of them, to be given a new heart. So he made the usual pact with a minion from Hell (and what a minion!) Both sides kept their word in the ultimate bargain.

DISCONTINUITY

BY RUSS MARKHAM

Clayton struggled up the stairs, flogging his unwilling body every inch of the way. The small, overnight case clutched in a vice-like grip by a left hand at the end of a quivering arm, felt like a ton weight ready to drag him off balance so that he would fall backwards down the staircase.

He paused on the sixth step, the veins and arteries at both sides of his temples pulsing and throbbing. He stood as still as his trembling legs would allow, his right hand grasping the banister with the desperation of a drowning man holding on to a life-line. A red fog interspersed with completely black, cloudy-looking patches obscured his vision. There was a tight band around his throat, and another and broader one around his chest making every breath a dreadful, pain-wracked struggle. His heart hesitated, stumbled and missed a beat, then picked up its rickety stroke again.

Clayton knew that his very hours were numbered unless he could pull off the miracle upon which his life depended.

"There was plenty of time to get upstairs though," he reassured himself, "take it easy, put the case down and take one of those tablets in your waistcoat pocket."

There was wisdom in the calculated dictates of his mind. Carefully, he bent his tired knees a little, maintaining his head and body in an upright position—it wouldn't do to bend his head at all—he might fall. And he was sure that if he fell, he would have difficulty in getting up.

The case and its precious contents, sedulously garnered according to instructions, touched the bare, wooden tread. Thankfully, the man released his grip on it, and fumbled for the little, round pill-box. He held it tightly, with his fingers wrapped around its brightly coloured surface and thumbed off the lid with an action similar to the operation of a cigarette lighter. There were two emerald-green pills inside. The doctor had said that only one must be taken at a time. Clayton contemplated ignoring the instruction, and upending the box and swallowing both. Then reason re-asserted itself; he had no time for risk-taking, and there *was* a way of taking only one without relaxing the stabilising hold of his right hand on the rail.

He chuckled gaspingly—his heart might be on its last legs, but his brain still knew all the answers. He tilted the pill-box against his lips, allowed both tablets to roll into his mouth, then spat one back into its container. The tablet which he had retained in his mouth, he swallowed. It left a bitter, dry taste on his tongue.

Slowly, the drug stimulated the ailing, master-organ of life, and the blueness of cyanosis receded from Clayton's lips. The red mist before his eyes thinned, and the constrictions hampering his breathing slackened a few notches.

Clayton cursed the necessity for having to use the attic room at the top of the rambling house which he had purchased in the quiet village of Dulverton, but the light of the full moon at its zenith *had* to fall in the right place. And the skylight in the attic lent itself to the arrangement admirably.

He felt stronger now, and more confident of himself. But he retained his caution and picked up the case with the same, fastidious manoeuvre employed to put it down.

There were eight more steps to go; he would take a ten-second rest on each of them and fight a battle with fate for the possession of every one.

Step by fighting step, Clayton inched his way upwards. He evolved a little formula which he chanted to himself, "Slide

the right hand up the banister, lock-on, lift one foot and put it on the next step, bring up the other and repeat. *And don't drop the bag."*

The crimson fog was beginning to cloud his vision again when Clayton reached the top. He turned the brass door-knob, clicked on the light-switch, and stumbled unsteadily into the room. It was just as he remembered it from the one and only time he had been there before. The two old, straight-backed chairs looked solid enough, and gratefully, he sank on to one of them. He looked at his watch—he still had a good sixty minutes to spare before zero-hour. Time to think everything out properly. Fortunately he wouldn't have to exert himself further; the crates and trunks and old pictures, and even a decrepit-looking, half-sized billiard table with faded, green baize and cobweb-encrusted net pockets, were all ranged around the walls, leaving the centre of the room clear.

Clayton put the case alongside him on the other chair and snapped back the catches. The bottles, jars and vials inside were all intact, their revolting contents unspilled. One contained a dozen bat's eyes, the little spheres looking like glazed murky glass marbles. Another held a few spoonsful of mould taken from a pauper's grave on a moonless night. In a third and larger jar, two toads' bodies lay still and dead, each transfixed by a shimmering silver needle. Small, tightly-corked test-tubes, held precisely measured quantities of saltpetre, brimstone, dried blood, and quick-silver. They were the stock in trade of witches and warlocks, the ingredients required for dealing with entities from other regions—beings that only a desperate man would consider bargaining with.

His thoughts drifted back over his thirty years of life. A scant ten years before, he had still only been little more than an office boy in a large publishing firm. He had run errands for everyone, opened envelopes, stuck down envelopes, licked stamps and ferried manuscripts to and fro. What he had hated and envied most of all though, was despatching cheques to authors and agents alike. Every piece of valuable, coloured paper which had passed through his hands had felt like a drop of his life-blood leaving him—it had been a case of money, money everywhere and not a cent for him. Gradually, he had become fired with the ambition to write for himself.

It had been painfully slow work; to produce five hundred words of worthwhile prose had always taken Clayton a full day's effort. He had had to give up his normal work or face the reality that he would never finish his novel on a part-time basis of working. And so the inevitable problem of providing for bed and board had arisen. Fortunately for him, he had been blessed with the dark, lean, hungry good-looks and smouldering eyes which appealed to certain females of the species homo. Gradually, he had learned that by spending part of his time pandering to the wishes of some of the plainer ones, they could be induced to part with the substantial savings that this variety always seemed to possess. They had thought themselves inveterate spinsters, and had done their best to provide themselves with a frail, financial canoe to paddle perilously through life's buffeting waters, and lo, here was an unexpected helpmate with whom they could share the journey—while the money lasted.

Altogether it had taken three years and many unfortunate victims to finalise the novel, 'A Star for the Morning.' Three more years and another string of monetary 'angels' had had to be worked through before he had found a publisher, and then, twelve months after publication, when royalties were trickling in with only painful slowness, an American film producer had bought a copy of the book to read on his Transatlantic plane journey to the celluloid citadel. Clayton's world had gone mad: sixty thousand dollars had been obtained for the film rights; book sales had soared at the news of the projected film, and had risen even higher when it was released and became a box-office diamond mine; and his second, half-written novel had been purchased sight unseen.

The second novel and its follow-up film had been an even greater success; the film and literary world had lionised him; his future was secure, until faintly at first, disturbing vagaries in his health had forced themselves into view. Visits to specialists, one after another, had produced the same, monotonous and horrifying verdict—he had a fatal heart condition. Shorn of all the medical jargon, what it amounted to was that the mechanism which induced the heart to continue beating regularly was on the blink. The tiny, electrical impulses were being generated more and more fitfully; of course, stimulants would help—for a while—but the time would come when the

bundle of nerves concerned would just ignore all stimuli and pack up permanently.

It had been a bitter blow, and for two weeks of the two months allocated to him, Clayton had brooded morbidly upon his rapidly approaching demise. Then the ruthless, mental energy which had driven him so far, re-asserted itself. If science and medicine could do nothing for him, could anything else?

A series of faith-healers, and a multitude of charlatans and quacks advertising in obscure, mediumistic journals had all been rapidly subjected to his cold scrutiny. He had rejected the lot without wasting time on their obviously spurious wares.

Only one thing remained—Black Magic—would it work? Clayton determined he would find out. On the pretext of doing research for a coming historical novel, he had been granted permission to delve into the secrets of certain ancient tomes in the British Museum. There had been a spell described in detail in one of them, a spell which demanded special ingredients, little-known drawings and a knowledge of secret keywords.

With one month and one full moon available, Clayton had used money and the services it would buy to secure all that was needed. On the night concerned, he had uncharacteristically given his servants a few days off duty—he wanted no interfering witness to what he hoped would happen in the attic room of his large, newly-acquired house.

Clayton looked at his watch again—forty-five minutes to go before the moon was at its peak—better get started on the preliminaries. The drawing of the pentacle was the first job—it had to be laid out with precision. He fumbled in the case, and then remembered, *he hadn't brought the pot of paint and the brush with him to form the outline!*

For a few moments he stood enveloped in a mood of black depression and fury, he couldn't face descending and climbing the stairs again—it would kill him—yet without the paint how could he shape the pentacle? He looked around the room intently and his eyes lit upon the boxes and crates strewn around its perimeter. Maybe there was something of use in one of them. A frantic search proved that there wasn't.

Clayton clenched his fists and swore vilely, only stopping when his blood-pressure started to climb uncomfortably under

the influence of his blazing ferocious temper. With iron resolution, he fought for control of his emotions when the red flecks started creeping back in front of his eyes. Then the fact of the old billiard table's presence impinged upon his consciousness—there might be a chance yet. On hands and knees he crouched before its tilted, green slab of a shape, fumbling feverishly in its pockets. He found what he was looking for on the fifth try—a cube of greenish-blue chalk almost unused.

Abruptly his mood changed again, and he rocked back on his heels laughing crazily while he held up and admired the six-sided object as if it was the Koh-i-nor.

The mad exultation drained from him when his tilted eyes caught sight of his wrist watch; only twenty-five minutes were left.

Taking out a small knife, Clayton carefully scraped off the dark-brown shiny paper which protected the surface of the chalk, and started laying out the diagram of power on the floor. It took him ten more nerve-wracking minutes of concentrated effort to do it. Finally, he arranged his horrendous materials in the proper positions and checked the time again; ten minutes were left, time enough for his last piece of preparation.

There had been words to be pronounced in a proper sequence and which had to terminate at the exact crucial moment. How to accomplish this had baffled Clayton for a while, then he had hit upon the solution—why not practise them until he was word perfect, then tape record the whole series of sounds? He had timed the incantation, it took precisely three minutes and fifteen seconds to play back.

Taking the miniature, battery-operated tape recorder from his case, Clayton laid it on his lap while he checked the tape position on the small spools. It was all ready to go—five minutes yet to wait. He got up swiftly and switched off the naked bulb dangling from its ceiling cord. The cold, silver radiance of the moon flooded down illuminating the pentacle. Clayton sat hunched in his chair counting off the seconds, and switched on the recorder at the calculated time.

The spools started rotating, snatching at the little loop of slack tape hungrily. The Latin words of power boomed out from its speaker and the case of the recorder vibrated resonantly between his fingers. Clayton stared at the coldly-gleaming numerals on the watch face as the sweep second hand eclipsed

each one briefly. The final word crashed forth just as the slender pointer slid over the twelve—countdown accomplished on time.

There was a timeless instant while Clayton switched his stare from his wrist to the pentacle, bathed in its glistening pool of light.

A shape was forming, becoming more substantial with every passing second. Abruptly the tenuous form solidified, as if a projection lens had suddenly been adjusted to the correct focus.

The man gasped involuntarily in amazement. Before him stood the last thing in the world, or heaven or hell that he had expected—a voluptuous, shining, female figure whose full breasts and curving thighs were fully and impudently displayed to his staring eyes. The skin was reddish hued and a slender, pointed tail swished lazily to and fro like a tiger's. Clayton's gaze roved upwards to the face with its startling, slanting, green eyes and the tiny horns above the forehead. It was an impossible but fascinating compound of all racial strains found on Earth. The full lips moved.

"You seem surprised to see me."

Clayton started to reply but found his mouth too dry. He swallowed for a moment, then tried again.

"You're a woman," he croaked, his pulse hammering.

The creature smiled disarmingly and shook its head.

"Hardly that, but I *am* female."

"A female demon," repeated the man unbelievably.

"I'll let you into a little secret," was the smooth reply.

"We're not demons in the sense that you mean. But we are of another plane or dimension, and because of the fact that we are living creatures, there are males and females comprising our race the same as there are in most others. It's more interesting that way," she finished slyly.

"Do you have names?" asked Clayton irrelevantly.

"Of course. Mine is Jezrella—what's yours?"

"Clayton is one of them, though most people call me Clay," he answered, becoming more at home with the situation as the first shock wore off. Doubt entered his mind at Jezrella's flesh and blood appearance. "Can you do the things that legend attributes to you?"

"It depends on what you want," replied Jezrella. "If you ask for a mountain of diamonds, I can't do it, but if you want advice upon becoming wealthy, I can probably provide that."

Clayton shook his head brusquely. "I've got wealth enough and the means to make more—what I need is time."

"I can't help you there," Jezrella said. "Time travel is impossible."

"You don't understand," said Clayton patiently. "My heart has become unreliable, what I want is to have it made healthy. Then I can manage the rest. Our doctors can do nothing for me—can you?"

Jezrella stared piercingly at Clayton's chest for a few moments, her eyes hard and unwinking. She nodded.

"I can see what is wrong and I can correct it. Do you wish to make a bargain with me?" She ran her open hands downwards over the smooth outline of her thighs, and waited.

Hope flared in Clayton's mind, but caution was there also. "What do you get out of the deal?" he asked shrewdly. "I've never believed all this guff about selling the soul—what use is it to anybody?"

Jezrella shrugged undulantly. "You are wrong in assuming that it is of no interest to me. True we do not roast a soul over slow fires like your legends say. It is the life-force of the personality that we are interested in, and particularly that of a different and interesting personality."

"What do you do with this 'life-force'?" pursued Clayton doggedly.

Jezrella hesitated, then spread her arms with a Gallic gesture. "I may as well tell you I suppose. In a sense we eat it—perhaps absorb would be a better word—anyway it becomes one with our being and a part of our complete makeup."

Clayton narrowed his eyes and stared once again at the female entity's face. He could understand now, the origins of the peculiar complex of features which comprised it.

"And when does this absorbing of a personality take place?" he queried cautiously.

"At the instant before death, or at some time before it, if circumstances are appropriate, providing of course, that the subject is satisfied that the bargain arranged has been consummated."

"What *are* the prior circumstances?" demanded Clayton suspiciously.

Jezrella giggled girlishly, her breasts shaking in sympathy with her amusement. "Come now, you can hardly expect me to explain to you what they are. But I will tell you that they are quite rare. Anyway," she said with sudden seriousness, "do you have the time to prevaricate?"

"No, I suppose not," said Clayton wearily.

"Is it a bargain then? Your soul for a healthy heart?"

"Yes," replied the suddenly impatient man, "providing that I am completely satisfied that you have fulfilled your side of it."

"Done," she said. "Don't move for a moment." Jezrella stared again at his chest and green sparks floated from her eyes to his body. She blinked and lowered her eyes. "That's it; you're well again."

"I don't feel any different," he retorted. "Prove that I'm all right."

"You prove it," she said petulantly. "Run down the stairs and back up again. You couldn't do that if you weren't cured."

Clayton stared at her appraisingly. "O.K. If I'm not cured and the effort kills me, the deal's off isn't it?"

Jezrella nodded. "*And if you do it, 'the deal' as you call it, is on. Agreed?*"

"Right," he answered shortly, turning to the stairs door.

In seconds he was back, panting a little, but grinning triumphantly. There was no red mist before his eyes, he could breathe rapidly again without pain, and his heart thumped against his ribs with the cheerful vigour of youth. "Fair enough," he confirmed to the languorous figure waiting inside the pentacle, "it works fine."

"Good," she murmured, her outline becoming hazy.

"Don't go, I want to talk a little longer," protested Clayton.

"I'm not going, I'm coming nearer," she replied a little indistinctly.

Clayton watched fascinatedly as Jezrella's lascivious body ebbed away into a fog which oozed through the pentacle's outline in infinitely thin wisps. Once outside the occult shape, the threads of vapour gathered together and congealed again. Jezrella stood breathtakingly close to him.

A vague feeling of alarm gnawed at Clayton's mind. "I thought the pentacle confined your movements," he said, his voice shaking a little.

She giggled, and her body vibrated sensually against his. "Normally it does, if the outline is continuous as it would be with paint." Her arms crept around him and her face came close to his. "*But you drew this one with chalk, so that the outline is made up of millions of tiny, separate particles with a space between each one.*"

"What difference does that make?" quavered Clayton, standing stiffly within her embrace.

"It makes the difference between me claiming my side of the bargain now and waiting until you die," replied Jezrella enthusiastically, pressing her lips to his.

They were like twin magnets drawing at the very life-force of his brain. He struggled, but her arms were suddenly bands of steel beneath their sleek exterior. Slowly, he was absorbed, his vital force trickling from one living vessel to another like sand moving irresistibly between the bulbs of an hour-glass. Within Jezrella's mind, his personality, though attenuated, lingered intact for a while before dissolving and dissipating like a spoonful of sugar in a cup of hot tea. Jezrella released Clayton's body, which slid to the floor. It was an adult, healthy, but utterly mindless hulk of flesh, that sat and gibbered and drooled—a house without a tenant.

Jezrella licked her lips daintily, flicked her tail arrogantly, and vanished.

—Russ Markham

Remember



Poppy Day

Saturday, November 10th

Film Review**THE PREMATURE BURIAL**

New American in Eastman Colour and Panavision

Starring Ray Milland and co-starring Hazel Court, Richard Ney and Heather Angel

The Poe snippet, "The Premature Burial," built into a screenplay by writers Charles Beaumont and Ray Russell, is one of the best of the new-style attempts at producing a creepy movie without the laugh lines coming in at the wrong places. It stands out for good acting and directing, producer-director Roger Corman ("Pit And The Pendulum") brings out fine performances by Ray Milland as "Guy Carrell," the man who fears being buried alive, his sister Kate (Heather Angel), bride-to-be Emily Gaunt (Hazel Court) and family friend Dr. Miles Archer (Richard Ney).

Although some of the planned shocks do not come off (cinema audiences being shock-prone these days) my credits go to Beaumont and Russell for a fine working script and the genius who decided on "Alive, Alive, O" as the eerily whistled theme tune for the gravediggers.

Now generally released, the film develops Guy's fear of catalepsy and premature burial to the stage where he builds a foolproof vault crammed with escape devices, only to destroy it after his marriage to Emily Gault. Thereafter his fears become magnified by a series of incidents which induce catalepsy—and his burial in a normal grave. The closing scenes are tense and dramatic, and cleverly filmed (congratulations, too, to Floyd Crosby, director of photography).

Charles Beaumont is, of course, well known as a s-f writer and Ray Russell (ex-fiction editor of *Playboy*) is noted for his many gruey short stories, his outstanding Gothic horror, "Sardonicus," being likened to Poe at his best. In correspondence with Ray Russell regarding the film, he writes:

"When Chuck Beaumont and I agreed to write the film version of *The Premature Burial*, the first thing we did—naturally—was take down our Unabridged Poe from the

shelf and re-read the story. We were in for a shock—but not the sort one usually expects to receive from a Poe yarn—for, unlike the stories that formed the bases of the two earlier Poe films (*House Of Usher* and *Pit And The Pendulum*), this story was not really a story at all; more like a formal essay on the disadvantages and general undesirability of being buried alive. And so we had to build the whole structure from the ground up—plot, characters, and dialogue—while retaining the essential elements of Poe's piece; namely, the obsessive terror of premature burial.

"In the picture, as filmed, there does remain one passage taken verbatim from Poe—it is Guy's speech down in the family vault, beginning, "The unendurable oppression of the lungs . . . the stifling fumes of the damp earth . . . the rigid embrace of the coffin . . ."

"In an earlier draft, however, we tried to get in more of the Poe original. Considerations of length made it necessary to jettison several scenes, but perhaps the readers of *Science Fantasy* would be interested in reading the following sequence which did not reach the screen. They will recognise it as being derived directly from Poe."

An unfilmed sequence from the Motion Picture

by Charles Beaumont and Ray Russell

An expanse of greenery. The sun shines brightly; the air is clear; birds sing. Seated on the grass, a festive picnic luncheon spread on a cloth between them, are Guy and Emily. Their conversation, light and gala at first, has become darkly-toned as Guy has begun to tell Emily of his fears of being buried alive. At this point, she says . . .

EMILY

These things are morbid phantasies,
nothing more.

GUY

Morbid . . . yes. But phantasies?

CLOSEUP—GUY

GUY (Cont.)

There have been cases, many cases,
too many . . . I have read of them . . .
these are not fictions, but facts.

There was a case in America recently . . .

Baltimore . . . the young wife of a prominent
lawyer . . .

RIPPLE DISSOLVE

GUY'S NARRATIVE (EFFECT)

As Guy narrates the case O.S., we see it enacted before our eyes. The action is seen through some identifying effect, such as a distortion lens, or a sudden excursion into monochrome. It is shot M.O.S., and the sets are fragmentary, dream-like, perhaps no more than black velvet.

LONG SHOT—INT. A DINING ROOM

A dinner party is in progress. Several guests of various ages. At the head of the table, the handsome young LAWYER plays host. At the other end, his pretty WIFE is a gracious hostess.

TIGHT ON LAWYER

Gaily, he lifts his champagne glass to make a toast.

TIGHT ON WIFE

Smiling, she lifts her glass. But before she can drink, a sign of distress crosses her face and she drops the glass.

GUY (O.S.)

The lady was seized by a sudden and unaccountable illness . . .

A SALON GROUPSHOT. WIFE SUPINE ON CHAISE.

LAWYER, DOCTOR STANDING OVER HER

The Doctor chafes her wrists, as she tosses her head restlessly as if in a fever.

GUY (O.S.)

It completely baffled her physician . . .

BEDROOM TWOSHOT

WIFE in bed. LAWYER standing over, troubled and attentive. Medicines on a side table.

GUY (O.S.)

She lingered for a few days, and then . . .

CLOSEUP WIFE'S HEAD ON PILLOW

Her eyes close and her head falls to one side, totally inert.

GUY (O.S.)

. . . she died. Or was thought to have died.

BACK TO TWOSHOT

The Lawyer, shocked, calls out to her, bends over her, taking her face in his hands. Horrified, he backs away . . . then, as if clubbed by grief, he throws himself upon her still form, weeping uncontrollably.

A BIER

The wife lies upon it in state, dressed in her bridal gown, a diamond tiara on her lovely brow. Nearby, the Lawyer stands in mourning garments, numb with grief. The friends we saw at the dinner party pass slowly by the inert woman, paying their last respects.

GUY (O.S.)

The poor lady assumed all the signs of death. Her face became pinched and sunken. Her lips, pallid as marble. There was no warmth. Pulsation has ceased. During the last rites, her lovely body was as cold and rigid as stone . . .

A BURIAL VAULT—Ext.

The wife, covered by a sheet, is being carried solemnly into the vault.

GUY (O.S.)

She was not laid in the earth, but deposited in the family vault . . .

INT. THE VAULT

The pallbearers place the sheet-shrouded body on a high bier and leave. They take their lanterns with them. The only light comes from a single flickering torch set in a wall-sconce.

EXT. BURIAL VAULT

The pallbearers are seen leaving. It take two of them to close the heavy door and seal it.

GUY (O.S.)

The ponderous door was shut and sealed . . .

INT. THE VAULT

Wife on bier, covered by the sheet.

GUY (O.S.)

For two days after her entombment, the young lady lay absolutely still. But then . . .

Slowly, a white arm protrudes, and the sheet moves away from the face.

CLOSEUP WIFE'S PALLID FACE ON BIER

Her eyes flutter. Slowly, they open.

GUY (O.S.)

. . . she regained consciousness! For she had not been dead at all, but merely a victim of death's grim counterfeit . . .

MED. SHOT WIFE ON BIER

Terrified, she sits up and glances about her. With effort she descends from the bier.

GUY (O.S.)

With great difficulty—for she was weak with lack of food and the debilitating effects of the illness—she dragged herself to the door of the vault.

AT THE DOOR OF THE VAULT

She falls against it. Weakly, she tries to push it open, vainly she calls out.

GUY (O.S.)

The door was heavy, and it was sealed. The lady had no strength in her limbs or in her voice. How long she struggled and called out, we will never know . . .

CAMERA PANS over to the wall-torch

Slowly, as Guy speaks, the flame lowers and lowers until it is gone and the screen is plunged into blackness.

GUY (O.S.)

. . . But in time, the air within the vault grew too stale to support life. (Slight pause, in the blackness). Then, three years later—

EXT. BURIAL VAULT

The Lawyer, now with a touch of grey at his temples, approaches the door.

GUY (O.S.)

The Lawyer's father died. In making arrangements for the old gentleman's interment, the lawyer visited the family vault . . .

TIGHT ON DOOR AND LAWYER

He breaks the seal and begins to turn the great handle.

GUY (O.S.)

. . . and broke the seal.

The door swings open, more quickly than expected, and—shockingly—into the Lawyer's arms falls a ghastly skeleton dressed in the mouldering remains of a bridal gown and wearing a diamond tiara.

CLOSEUP THE GRINNING SKULL, with tiara.

RIPPLE DISSOLVE

END OF GUY'S NARRATIVE AND EFFECT

CLOSEUP GUY

Against picnic scene background, as before.

GUY

. . . She died there against the door, you see and thus she remained until she fell, *rattling*, into her husband's horrified embrace!

With adult audiences, this movie seems to have come off a lot better than it has with teenagers—perhaps there is a lesson to be learned there for moviemakers in general.

John Carnell

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